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QUEER SPACES, RELIGIOUS PLACES: SHARING RISK AND MAKING KIN WITHIN A QUEER CHURCH AMIDST A PANDEMIC

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**QUEER SPACES, RELIGIOUS PLACES: SHARING RISK
AND MAKING KIN WITHIN A QUEER CHURCH
AMIDST A PANDEMIC**

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sadie V. Counts
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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to explore the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic on a queer, Christian congregation of the Metropolitan Community Church in Knoxville, TN and the impacts of the pandemic on queer kinship and intimacy within the church setting. The thesis explores the ways in which queer kinship manifests within the church and how those relationships have been disrupted and altered by COVID. It also compares the long-term effects of the AIDS epidemic on the church congregation and the ways in which they may be experiencing COVID in a similar manner. Finally, the project explores the ways that intimacy has changed and adapted through necessary means and how digital technologies are being utilized in order to maintain feelings of intimacy. This analysis is done against the backdrop of the biosocial implications of risk connected both to COVID-19 and AIDS as well as the larger theoretical frameworks associated within queer kinship and intimacy.

Keywords: Queer, kinship, intimacy, risk, biosocial, COVID

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INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT

It is Sunday morning in October of 2019, and I am making my way to the Knoxville Metropolitan Community Church on Redeemer Lane in the Rocky Hill neighborhood. I have not been inside a church willingly in over eight years. As I am perpetually late, I glance at Google maps and am assured that it will take 20 minutes to get there. However, it takes 25. As I follow the signs, I find myself in a neighborhood, and puzzled, continue to follow the small markers posted on telephone poles that eventually lead me to an inconspicuous building tucked behind two homes, as if it were a home all unto itself. There is no steeple, no large cross or stained-glass windows, the building is humble and modest and rests next to a field filled with a menagerie of goats, chickens, and horses. What an odd place for a church and a “farm?” I ponder as I park.

I walk in the front door and immediately everyone turns to look at me because the service started roughly five minutes before. It being my first time here I mistakenly enter the sanctuary through the front door, accidentally announcing my arrival at the front of the room. I make a mental note to locate a back door next time to not draw so much attention to myself as I know this will not be my last time being late. I put my head down and quickly scurry to an empty seat in the back of the room. Relief fills me as I take my seat and situate myself, notebook in hand. My first observation is immediate. I am the youngest person in the room by at least twenty years if not more. This is not what I had expected at all. Now I feel as if I really stick out, especially with my bright blue hair. I notice the two men sitting behind me have a beautiful dog with them. I smile, and as I examine further, I quickly notice that the dog bears no vest or tag to denote it as a service animal, but instead rests on the floor with its head on its paws in a plain purple harness.

At first glance one might not think that this is anything more than your typical, small, non-denominational congregation. But a closer look hints at the something slightly different about this space. The pastor wears a rainbow stole, a rainbow candle burns on the alter, the microphones for the no longer existent choir are subtly rainbow colored, and two rainbow quilts hang on the wall at the front of the room. Then of course there is the congregation. My best guess would be that the majority of them are age 50-70, and many of them sit in nuclear family units, mostly as couples without children. There are no children, no young adults. There are some people alone, while others sit with friends who are not partners. I notice they are overtly white, “average” as some might say. Just your typical white, middle-class Americans. Some of them have stereotypical “queer” characteristics, such as women with “butch” haircuts, and I notice at least one man in skinny jeans who’s also sporting some mascara. The couple behind me with the dog holds hands. I suspect they are in their 70s. I think about how long they must have been together, and how brave they are for having been together so long. I imagine their whole lives and smile, although their coupledness surprises me as a potential surrender to homonormativity and I wonder if they are married or not as I look for wedding bands on their left hands. I suddenly snap out of my daydreaming when I realize it is time for communion and a sense of dread floods over me. At this point I’m not even sure if I remember how to take communion, and it’s done differently at every church. I am suddenly transported to the one time I attended a mass with my college roommate to try and be supportive when I was denied communion for not being baptized in the Catholic church, would I be denied here as well? I watch the couple go up together, the shorter one in the yellow shirt walks behind the tall one in the tweed blazer. His right hand holds his partner’s, and his left holds the dog’s leash. I choose to take communion too, and when I reach the front of the room a wafer is placed in my mouth and

hands are laid on me in prayer. It is a strange feeling; I cannot remember the last time I did this. I feel guilty, I'm an imposter, I don't really believe in any of this stuff anymore, I'm lying to them already and I haven't even said anything. I swallow my wafer and go back to my seat.

The service ends and the pastor encourages the congregation to greet one another. I worry that this will be the moment I'm finally interrogated for my presence; I get hung up on the fact that maybe I don't look "gay enough." This anxiety stems from my concerns of not being accepted with the space and for the congregation to be suspicious of my intentions if I am not seen as "one of them." Some of these fears stem from bullying in middle and high school as well as my closetedness to much of my extended family. I wonder to myself if I will be accepted if I am perceived as hetero-passing, as I notice that most people are grouped off in homosexual couples. As all of these thoughts are racing through my mind, I realize the pastor is suddenly standing in front of me, smiling. She welcomes me, and asks who I am. I tell her the truth. I am a doctoral student at UT, I'm working with the Voices Out Loud Project, and I'm interested in writing my Master's thesis on MCC. I pause and brace for backlash. I wonder how all the other anthropologists before me did this, just waltzed into a village and announced they were here to "study the natives" without any ethical considerations, IRB approval, or consent forms.

She smiles and says that they're happy to have me. I detect sincerity in her voice. She says there are plenty of people who would love to speak with me, and then I notice the couple with the dog who had been sitting behind me is waiting behind her to do just that. She motions to them and suggests that they would be great church members to talk to. The shorter one in the yellow shirt introduces himself as Rick and his partner as Bob and tells me immediately that he's thrilled I'm here. He asks me about my research and I watch him hang onto every word, then he responds with enthusiasm that my work is so important and he couldn't be happier that I'm

doing it. Bob just stands behind him and smiles and nods. I then ask about the dog, and they introduce me to Sadwrn, who is named after a Polish saint. They tell me he comes with them every week because they take him everywhere. I comment on how beautiful and well behaved he is. They then immediately invite me to lunch, and I accept.

This is my famed ethnographic “arrival scene,” the moment all cultural anthropologists write about. For me, what started with dread and anxiety was met with acceptance and excitement, which would set the tone for the rest of my fieldwork and my experiences with my field site and field community. It soon became clear to me that the church is not only a religious space, but a space for communion outside of religion, one where gay people feel they can congregate and socialize, often without a religious agenda to attend to. This space of gay culture is one that is designated by its sense of family, where legal families in the form of married couples create kinship ties with friends, where gay couples who actively eschew marriage in the sake of queerness are just as much family as those who are siblings, parents, aunts, and uncles.

Growing up with a United Methodist pastor of a grandfather, Sunday afternoons were reserved for family lunch after church. It was a special time set aside for all of us to be together and to share a meal outside of our busy schedules, one of the most common denominators of a family: a special shared meal. My grandfather would sit at the head of the table and admire what he had made: 5 children, their (at the time) 4 spouses, and at the time 4 grandchildren. Those Sunday afternoons represented a specific space where our family felt most realized, most together. It has been over 10 years since we have done family lunches on Sunday afternoons, as the family has grown to 5 children and their 5 spouses and 9 grandchildren and 1 spouse.

It was these memories of my childhood that got me thinking about family at MCC and the way it has manifested in different, but also more similar ways to my traditional, nuclear

family growing up. My very first Sunday at MCC I was invited to share a meal with Rick and Bob, something that would become a weekly tradition until health concerns would no longer allow it. While the church is an LGBT church, it carried into its sense of family and family-making other normative, American traditions of what “Church on Sunday” looked like. The substantivism of meal sharing is one of the ways in which kinship manifests within the MCC community. As scholars of kinship have pointed out, such as Schneider (1968, 1984), Weston (2001), and Carsten (2001), sharing bread via substantivism – or the sharing of information, bodily fluids, or in this case substance from the same hearth/table – not only within the confines of a religious communion, but also within the social setting of a meal, creates a sense of family and intimacy that is paralleled by Sunday afternoon lunches and dinners shared by families all over the country following a church service. This is also mirrored in weekly communions at MCC.

When it is time for communion, it is made clear that everyone is welcome at the table, and the emphasis of this sentence feels like a direct response to both Catholic and Protestant ideologies in their configurations of communion, with non-Catholics not being allowed to take communion in mass, and the explicit disapproval of queer lifestyles from many Protestant denominations. Communion at MCC is an extremely intimate experience, as members of the congregation that present communion that week take the wafer, dip it in the wine/juice, and then place it on your tongue for you, while someone else places a hand on your shoulder in prayer. Although brief and experienced by everyone who chooses to take communion, this moment of exchange can become extremely intense and personal, as is reflected by the Christian doctrine of the last supper – the first communion – being an intense and intimate experience as well. In this moment of communion, we are not merely church members eating strange little wafers, we are a

family: a family in Christ (potentially), a family in queerness, and a family in solidarity as a community that is created within the church. This is the only church I have visited where communion is served weekly, as a constant affirmation of acceptance, love, and forgiveness. These concepts of being a family in Christ carry over to being a family with one another. My first Sunday at MCC, I took communion even though I do not adhere to Christian doctrines because in that moment it was not about believing or not believing, but rather it was about love and family, the love that the people at MCC have for one another not as Christians, but as queer people.

The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) was founded in 1968 with the goal of promoting civil and human rights by addressing issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and global human rights worldwide. According to their website (mccchurch.org) they were the first church to perform same-gender marriages and have been on the forefront of the fight for equality among gender, sexual, and racial minorities. The Knoxville branch of the MCC advertises itself as serving the GLBT and straight communities of Knoxville and East Tennessee. This is the primary function of MCCs across the world as noted by their founder Troy Perry, who wanted to create a space where LGBT Christians and allies could all worship together without fear of prejudice or persecution, as many of the founding members had faced in the 1960s and prior from their respective churches. Not only does MCC openly label themselves as GLBT serving, but everything from the decorations of the sanctuary to the format and topics of the sermon to their extracurricular events reveal that the church's primary function is to cater to the GLBT identifying parishioners in ways that other denominations do not and cannot. Within Knoxville, those who do not feel accepted even in more accepting denominations such as the United Methodist Church (UMC) due to their sexual non-normativity, whether explicitly stated or

implicitly practiced, may choose to engage with “communities” belonging to the Universalist Unitarian Church (UUC), or as is the focus of this project, the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). As a GLBT serving church, MCC functions as both a haven and a refuge for marginalized groups, and while serving these purposes, takes religious meaning as secondary to fulfill those needs.

MCC functions as a special place of queer culture, one that is welcoming to all but caters particularly to an aging population, ones whose days of going out to bars to socialize and meeting friends or cruising at clubs is for the most part, long gone. When my partner and I go to MCC, it does not matter that neither of us are religious and only one of us is queer, as we are accepted into the space simply because we chose to come there and experience it, not for religious reasons but social (and in my case academic) reasons. We certainly do stick out though, as we are some of the youngest attendees and one of the only hetero-passing couples to attend. The church is made up almost exclusively of white, cisgender, gay, lesbian, and bisexual men and women who are in their fifties or older. The patrons tend to be middle class as many of them are retired or, those who do continue to work, have the luxury of working from home. While there are occasionally visitors who fall out of this demographic, those regular members and most attendees tend to follow these patterns.

Knoxville’s particular situation at the intersection of rural, small towns and urban metropolises allows it to have a gay subculture, but one that does not have the amenities a large city could afford. With a large university and a robust social atmosphere, there is a significant gay population within Knoxville. The university provides sites of community for queer students, faculty, and staff through the Pride Center and other queer groups, and the social scenes of

Happy Holler, Downtown, and West Knox provide bars, clubs, restaurants, and more that are all queer friendly.

I was first introduced to MCC via Donna Braquet and the Voices Out Loud (VOL) project based in Hodges Library at the University of Tennessee. I was fascinated to learn about this affirming church that had been situated in my hometown for my whole life that I had never heard of and knew nothing about. Through my fast-forming friendship with Rick and Bob and my research in the physical archive, I quickly learned more about both MCC as well as aids response Knoxville¹, or arK, founded by Bob. Much of the documentation about arK and MCC that exists currently lives in the Voices Out Loud archive, where it is being digitized so that it may live on and be more accessible to a broader demographic. These documents come from MCC's personal archive, which is currently being housed with the larger VOL archive as they represent an important component of Knoxville's queer history. I also became familiar with the work of queer Knoxville photographer Jan Lynch and his contribution to the queer history of Knoxville and the archive. Many of his photos today live in the Voices out Loud archive, which is actively preparing them for digitization in hopes of being available to the public in the near future.

THEORIZING MCC

MCC is a family in itself, distinct from birth or nuclear families. This conception of family is developed through means of sharing that in part create a materialization of this relationality. This sharing happens through sharing meals, sharing space, sharing time, and sharing touch. There is an inherent intimacy in sharing, one that is maintained through the

¹ Within the abbreviation, AIDS is lowercased purposefully to take agency away from the disease and lessen its power.

kinship ties that have been created at MCC. This became apparent to me on my very first visit to MCC, where I, a stranger, was met and welcomed with kindness and enthusiasm, with no need to defend my religious ascriptions or my sexual orientation. A family became evident to me through Rick, Bob, and Sadwrn, and after taking note of their coupledness, more and more couples began to emerge. Within this sense of family, I argue that MCC presents a site of queer kinship – via a shared sense of otherness and a negation with heteronormativity – which refers to the ways in which queer groups, individuals, and communities create kinship networks differently than the biological ones that we are more familiar with in a heteronormative society. Through studying relationships and care networks in San Francisco throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Kath Weston argued that by leaving their biological families, queer individuals were not revoking the idea of “family”, but rather redefining it through different types of relationships (1991). That is, rather than reject the idea of a “family” in the heteronormative or nuclear sense, queer people often form communities and families of their own that manifest in both similar and different ways to the heteronormative families of white suburbia that exist as the default of many definitions of family. Taking Weston’s theorization into account along with larger studies of kinship in anthropology that view sharing, economic exchange, and the sharing of food – or sharing amongst a hearth – as forms of kin relation, it becomes possible to infer the ways in which “family” is a practice of particular kinds of sharing. These theoretical intersections can aid in understanding the ways in which queer groups form bonds and communities which can become family structures through material forms of sharing. While Weston’s study is now canonical within queer anthropology, in this thesis I argue along the same lines as Weston that the family established at MCC is established not only on choice – as “families we choose” – but also in a shared sense of community that is tied together via exclusion, isolation, and trauma in

relation to gender and sexuality. However, I also posit that these families, especially in the case of a community such as MCC, are rooted in a sense of shared trauma, where the sense of family is built on traumatic memories and experience associated both with queerness and AIDS.

Current anthropological theory has moved away from understanding kinship based solely on consanguinity, substantivism, and marriage (Schneider 1968, 1984) and now views kinship as a fluid, evolving relationship that is based more so on sociality and relationality through mutuality (Sahlins 2013), which may occur through choice (Franklin and McKinnon 2001; Weston 1991, 2001) or via sites of power, relation, negotiation, and reciprocity (Mauss 1925; McKinnon 1991; Franklin and McKinnon 2001). This is based more prominently on the idea of a family being one that we actively choose during our lifetime over one that is preassigned to us before birth or dictated to us through social relationships (Franklin and McKinnon 2001; Weston 1991, 2001). Within the queer “community”, which is situated as a group through not only sexual and gender minority identities, but also through a shared marginalization, families by choice are often the main, or at times only, families that exist between and among queer persons (Franklin and McKinnon 2001; Weston 1991, 2001).

The AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and onward is an example of how shared marginalization and trauma can lead to specific forms of intimacy, kinship, and relationality through the materialization of this trauma via memory (Crimp 1989, 2003; Cvetkovich 2003) and the importance of creating networks of care and establishing gay families through this marginalization (Weston 1991). Even after the “end” of the AIDS epidemic, its memory continues to inform queer politics and relationships in the present and in the future (Crimp 1989, 2003). The trauma—and aftermath of necessitated care—created through the shared loss and survival of the AIDS epidemic becomes a part of the everyday for queer individuals and groups

and is archived via a shared memory, such as lesbian public culture (Cvetkovich 2003). I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has similar political and social consequences of both memory, trauma, and shared public culture, especially among queer groups who have already suffered through one epidemic. This argument is presented in chapter two and takes up previous literatures which have reviewed risk within queer subcultures as it relates to the contraction and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Tim Dean argues that this risk sharing is an affirmation of identity (and especially masculinity) and life as the virus allows for biological reproduction and senses of belonging (2009). This affirmation is paired with an opposition to the biopolitical implications of public health discourse through the transmission of risk – a risk of life and death – via bodily fluids (Dean 2009). Others have taken negating positions in relation to queer biosociality, especially through understanding queer non-reproducibility as a site of celebrating a present as opposed to futurity (Edelman 2004) and taking the sharing of HIV/AIDS as an ego-shattering project through a queer death drive (Bersani 2010). Through a narrative of trauma and memory, Douglas Crimp has argued that HIV/AIDS in gay subcultures has not only meant death of bodies, but also the death of specific forms of queer culture and sociality (Crimp 1989, 2003). I argue in chapter three that the queer biosociality fostered through COVID is a reconfiguration of the queer kinship and intimacy established in chapter one. Much like AIDS, COVID-19 presents risk in the form of a virus that spreads through fluids, both exiting and entering the body via various orifices. COVID-19's presence within the everyday aspects of many people's lives has led to groupings based on risk factors or shared genetic identities (Rabinow 1996), shared biologies such as underlying conditions or compromised immune systems (Petryna 2003), and disease susceptibility or predisposition (Rose 2017). Within the scope of this project, I argue that the current COVID-19 pandemic can be understood as a continuation of the HIV/AIDS

pandemic for those who maintain both a shared memory as well as shared traumas of the latter. Just as risk was vital to the materialization of their relationality in the 1980s and beyond, it is again vital to the maintenance of relationships of many of those within MCC today. I argue that the stresses of AIDS created sophisticated networks of care which created the foundations of kinship as discussed in chapter one and prepared the MCC community to handle the emotional and physical toll of a pandemic rooted in necessitated isolation and the denial of physical intimacy.

It is the shared sense of community in which I have chosen to better understand and define the queer community within the scope of this project, one that is real as opposed to imagined, as MCC is a real community. While communities exist, whether imagined or not, they require a space in which to exist. In historical and modern notions, churches have existed as spaces for specific communities, not simply religious communities but those religious communities deemed acceptable to use the space of the church. Within this project, the queer church exists as a space for queer community building and family “creating” through various forms of intimacy and kinship (Seitz 2017; Shirinian 2018). However, I argue that this space is one where religion is often included, but not deemed a necessity, for the space to be used by the community. This is often found in the distinction of church members between spiritual and religious, with those adhering to a more spiritual ideology seeking out the church as a primary site of socialization rather than religious fulfillment. I argue that both space and place play an important role in both the expressions of intimacy and kinship within MCC, and that the lack of a physical space has led to a reconfiguration of both kinship and intimacy which must be maintained by means other than physical touch. The existence of a queer space such as a queer church implies a level of queer performance as noted within and around the church setting.

Queerness and queer performance do not exist independently, but rather have spatial dimensions in which they occupy and are occupied as queer sociality within the context of a specific place and space (Gray 2009; Muñoz 2009). I argue that spaces such as these function toward multiple purposes for the queer community. As the church exists as a setting for queer communion via a religious backdrop, it is also a place for communion of the LGBTQ+ persons within Knoxville, at times devoid of religion as the shared identity of “gay” often overrides a presumed identity of “Christian.” Examining queer “community” in its material forms of sharing and relating as a necessity for queer life contributes to queer theory’s and queer anthropology’s interest in understanding how intimacy and kinship are changed or altered by their relationship to biosociality and risk. Queer intimacies may disrupt traditional conceptualizations of risk through the importance of maintaining bonds during times of great risk in order to preserve senses of kinship and community. Queerness is expressed in new ways within religious settings and its theoretical implications can be challenged when religion is added as an analytical tool (Seitz 2017). Within the scope of this project, I argue that the coexistence of both queer and religious spaces—particularly in the Southeastern U.S.—provides a refuge for a multiplicity of marginalized communities (queer, religious, and other). Churches have always been spaces of communion between members of a specific community, where bonds are made through material communion – the sharing of bread – among one another as a form of sociality (Polanyi 1944). I posit that within MCC, these bonds are not only made through material communion, but through a social and psychic communion as well via shared memories and trauma. Within the setting of a queer church, specifically MCC, bonds are formed not only through typical types of communion, but through intimacy and touch as well. Physical intimacy has been a kin-forming act for queer

people through various means, whether through sexual touch, friendly touch, familial touch, or even nonfamiliar touches (Dean 2009; Sahlin 2013; Shirinian 2018).

The effects the COVID-19 crisis has had on many have led to changes in the ways that intimacy is shared and experienced, as intimacy can manifest contradictions, fear of loss, and forms of “nonsovereignty” and relationality that produce a loss of control and an internal confrontation of one’s own limits (Berlant and Edelman 2014). This project seeks to understand how particular queer forms of sociality and relation may have been disrupted by the pandemic through an exploration of biosociality. Individuals must ask themselves who they are willing to risk touching and how much they are willing to risk to touch. For some this risk may cost nothing, while for others it may cost them their lives. While biosociality has been explored through the lens of the Human Genome Initiative via the construction of genetic identities that produce sociality (Rabinow 1996), the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster via the creation of biological citizens that create biosociality through a shared suffering that makes demands of the state (Petryna 2003), and the sharing of HIV as an affirmation of queer kinship (Dean 2009), this project aims to discover an alternative materialization of biosociality. By exploring questions of intimacy and kinship within the context of pandemics and the effects of these elements on the MCC community (informed by queer studies’ attention to these questions), this project aims to contribute to anthropological inquiry of how biosociality is a site of both relation-making and risk-taking. With the closure of the physical space of the church, I argue that while parishioners have moved to more normative – nuclear family or domestic partnership – forms of kin and intimacy creation, they have continued to maintain the intimacy and kinship established at and through MCC, just in different ways.

Choosing to understand various forms of intimacy as kinship leads to recognizing the importance that biosociality plays within these relations and the materialization of this relationality. While Dean sees biosociality as a sharing of fluids—and therefore the potential of sharing a virus—as an affirmation of life, identity, masculinity, and a formation of kinship (Dean 2009), others such as Petryna see biosociality as the sharing of a common biology on which political claims are made (Petryna 2003). This project works through these analytic frameworks of risk and biosociality to think about queer spaces as sites of sharing risk as well as the consequences to those spaces when risk is actively limited. In chapter three, I argue that COVID had demanded a reconfiguration of both kinship and intimacy, which has therefore impacted the biosocial nature of these forms of relation. The biosocial components of these types of bonds present a risk that is too great for the given community, and therefore require a new understanding of forms of queerness. Beyond a shared biology that activates political claims (Petryna 2003), or as the production of social identities via biomedical knowledge and identities (Rabinow 1996), biosociality might also be understood as a form of relation made through risk, a risk that is shared between and among persons to create intimacy in order to overcome feelings of marginalization. While the pandemic is a time of increased risk, it is also a time of limiting this risk, posing real challenges to the maintenance of intimacy within a queer community.

METHODS

This research was done through two specific ethnographic methods. The first of which was participant observation at MCC. From October 2019 to March 2020, I attended Sunday morning services and other social events hosted by both the church as well as members of the church such as potlucks and casual social events. From March 2020 on I attended church services virtually and stayed in touch with church members through digital means such as email,

Zoom, texts, and phone calls. During these meetings, services, and events I made observations of interactions among members, taking note of what people said, to whom they said it, and other forms of interaction through digital means, such as using chat functions on Zoom to express thoughts and show care, commenting on Facebook posts, and sharing information (including memes and other online events, which I also attended). Through this participant observation I compared interactions to pre-pandemic interactions and aimed to understand how digital space and the prohibition on touch has transformed the social space of the church.

The second part of my methodology was based in informal and exploratory interviews with several parishioners of the MCC congregation. These interviews were initially made up of casual conversations with my key interlocutors. I formally interviewed five parishioners and members of the church leadership and one local business owner related to the church congregation. My interviews were mainly with regular church attendees/leaders who actively participate both in worship services and church social functions, but included one outlier, a member of an affiliated LGBTQ+ group, to understand the importance of the intimate space of the church to a wider queer belonging in Knoxville. I also conducted one informal group discussion made up of myself and six church-affiliated individuals. I had between roughly ten and twenty informal conversations that informed this thesis with various church members over the course of my fieldwork. Based on preliminary research, I speculated that it would be likely that some of these parishioners and members of leadership would have deeply committed religious motivations while others' belonging to the church would be largely socially motivated. Interview questions probed into how churchgoers spend their time, with whom they live, with whom they risk interaction, with whom they share time, and how they are affected by the transition of the Church to an online space. I used a snowball method to gather contact

information of parishioners – starting with key interlocutors with whom I had already established a relationship, their referrals, and the referrals of these referrals. All formal interviews were conducted on Zoom save for one who requested to meet in person, following all CDC protocols.

I acquired access to the Knoxville MCC, which was established through the Voices Out Loud project. While doing preliminary research in this space I was welcomed by parishioners, who already knew that I am a graduate student conducting research and took interest in the work I am doing. I established good relationships with key members of the church such as the pastor and intern, and several board members, all of whom have been welcoming to my research.

Prior to the pandemic, I conducted in-person participant observation at times with my partner, Matt, serving as an unofficial research assistant. He would often attend church services and occasionally social events, specifically Sunday afternoon lunches with Rick and Bob, with me. He would sometimes share his own insights to what he noticed during services with me which I valued as they were coming from a more objective perspective, with Matt being an atheist and not having the same type of religious upbringing that I discussed at the beginning of this introduction. His presence at church services also helped us to “fit in” in a sense, as the congregation was dominated by couples. However, as I mentioned previously, our heteronormative-passing relationship did make us stand out in another way. I was grateful for Matt’s presence though, as congregation members welcomed him happily and would often comment on how excited they were to see a young couple in attendance, making them more eager to engage with me at later dates.

CHAPTER ONE

RELIGIOUS PLACES AS SOCIAL SPACES: GAY COMMUNION AS KINSHIP WITHIN MCC

It is a typical Sunday at MCC Knoxville in November of 2019. The service ends and everyone stands to greet each other. The soft murmur of voices quickly becomes chatter as people move about to talk to one another, sometimes through handshakes and other times through embraces. Always touching, old friends and new acquaintances share feelings and thoughts through the constant presence of physical touch. I witness relentless movement as people mingle about and cross the aisle in order to say hello to someone over here, shout goodbye to someone over there, catch up with someone across the room before they make their way towards the door, as the two separate sections of the room slowly merge into one. While this may be the normal run of events for any Sunday afternoon at MCC Knoxville, the third Sunday of the month is special as it marks an additional time of communion and camaraderie.

Instead of heading to the front door to leave, people make their way towards the back door leading to the kitchen in order to begin the process of setting up the monthly potluck. The blue chairs so neatly organized into five rows of ten chairs each, split down the middle to make two sections, are suddenly pulled apart and rearranged as tables begin to appear from closets that I had never noticed before. Soon there appear seven tables scattered around the now open space, three set up in the back in an “L” shape with the other four placed strategically around the room like dining tables in a grand hall. The chairs taken from their original position are now placed around the tables in numbers of eight, with three on each side and two at either end, creating heads of the tables. Meanwhile the bibles, hymnals, and “pew pads” that litter the room

are taken up and stored on a wooden cart with wheels conveniently placed next to the door to await the time until it will be needed again on the next Sunday morning.

As the tables and chairs are being set up by some, the rest of those present make themselves busy in the kitchen. The sound of chatter continues, joined by the opening and closing of drawers, cabinets, and the fridge. The aroma of fresh brewed coffee fills the room as it begins to percolate. Neither gourmet nor freshly ground, but what I call “office coffee,” the cheap kind you can buy in bulk, like Folgers, makes its presence known. Plates, napkins, and plastic flatware soon make their debut, fetched from some unknown kitchen drawer while the tables in the “L” shape in the back of the room are filled with an assortment of foods. They reserve one table for desserts, and I see that the homemade, pumpkin chocolate chip cookies that were my contribution are put at the front of the line. The adjacent table holds entrees and sides, split evenly between homemade and store-bought goodies. I notice mac n’ cheese of two varieties, potato salad, fried chicken, rolls, and an assortment of casseroles that smell like my grandmother’s house. In ten minutes, the room has transformed from a sanctuary to a reception, with enough places at the table for everyone in attendance. While Matt grabs coffee I find us a seat with Rick and Bob and notice that the placement of the tables and chairs makes for interesting social group dynamics as many couples tend to congregate together. We all make polite comments on how good the things other people brought look, even though no one eats the potato salad except the one person who brought it. My cookies are a hit though, and the compliments keep coming. It’s high praise for someone like me who considers themselves to be a disaster in the kitchen. The noise level rises again as the chatter picks up while everyone enjoys their meal along with the company.

The way we've arranged ourselves creates small little "families" at each table, with every chair filled and no one left out. I feel at ease being there, just like I feel at ease eating a meal at home. These monthly lunches give everyone a chance to talk about things outside of church, like work, family, friends, and even trivial little things like the weather. It's nice, and there's no pressure to be anything other than yourself here.

This ritual is performed by the congregation of MCC Knoxville. On the third Sunday of the month, the congregation holds a potluck in the sanctuary immediately following the service. A sign up for what to bring does not exist, and there are no assignments as to who should bring sweet or savory. Leaving everyone to their own devices, within a matter of minutes they transform the room from one of worship to one of communion and camaraderie through the simple act of sharing a meal. Tables and chairs are arranged, and food is set out which allows the congregation to enjoy time together in a social setting. Following the potluck, we perform a second ritual. After the members of the congregation have shared and consumed food among themselves, the time comes for them to prepare food that they will give to others. Every Monday night, members of the congregation go out and give the pre-prepared food from these Sunday afternoons to the homeless population that can be found in downtown Knoxville. In doing this particular ritual, the congregation not only shares a meal amongst themselves, therefore forming bonds that can potentially lead to understandings of kinship (through the understanding of sharing meals after church as a family affair), but also takes part in the preparation of a meal that will later be given to others. In doing this, the church community continues to build intimacy within itself through the various means of preparing and distributing food together in what can be seen as an intentional act of humanitarianism. This act of non-sharing, or giving, helps facilitate the ways in which the MCC community shares food as a means of creating family with

each other within the walls of MCC, but differentiates how the transfer of food from MCC members to Knoxville's homeless serves as an action that is more related to a power differential rather than a bond.

In this chapter, I consider the ways in which MCC congregation members perform familial and communal bonds through sharing. I will show that despite MCC being a church, much of the activity of the space is oriented toward creating not necessarily religious ties, but feelings of solidarity and community instead. By looking at the ways in which more traditional senses of "family" are associated by the congregation members, with feelings of guilt, shame, and exclusion, I highlight the ways in which the church creates a sense of home and refuge that provides for forms of relation that are not possible in other church spaces nor within the birth families of congregation members. While those who attend MCC have their own homes, organized by homonormative nuclear familiarity, the space of the church creates an assemblage of another larger and extended family, resulting in solidarity.

Sharing, Substance, and Kinship

Monthly post-sermon potlucks are a favorite among congregation members, as it serves as a time to both prepare something to be shared with loved ones as well as consume something prepared by a loved one in the company of other loved ones. The act itself becomes very intimate when considering the ways in which after-Church lunch is often seen as a traditional, family function. By sharing and preparing food together, the congregation reinforces their bonds as kin, as a queer community that has chosen each other through various means of "communion," not only in a religious sense, but in a social one as well. As I will discuss more thoroughly in the following chapter, this sense of family and communion is created largely through the shared memory and trauma of the AIDS crisis and the resilience of many members of MCC. This queer

kinship differs from other ties created within congregations nationally, as it is based in a sense of queer belonging through marginalization, suffering, and survival.

On any given potluck Sunday friends and family sit close together. I sit with Rick and Bob and Sadwrn of course. Because there is so much food spread among the two back tables in the Sanctuary, no one person could try everything on their first pass through at least. I watch as Bob comments on how much better “this” mac n’ cheese is from “that other one” as he offers his plate to Rick to try some. Rick then asks me if I got any (knowing that mac n’ cheese is my favorite food) as he then sees that I did in fact get both mac n’ cheeses. Across the table JR comments on how they are not a fan of the potato salad and their portion is then passed to the plate of the person on their left who smiles at the chance to partake in it. I take food from my plate to share with Sadwrn, whose head rests on my lap the whole time as his nose nudges my elbow softly, politely begging for constant attention and affection. “Are y’all still going to North Carolina next weekend?” “Are we still on for the movies this week?” “You’re still coming over tomorrow for coffee and tea, right?” and other conversations like this float around the room from table to table as I notice people moving about the space, both with and without their plates, sometimes ending their meal at a different table than the one they began at.

While conversations like these may also be associated with friendships, the community of MCC is one that not only sees themselves as friends but considers themselves a family. This creates a tension between the public and private spheres of life, with the church occupying a public-private sphere – a “queer zone” as noted by Berlant and Warner – and nuclear homes occupying private-private spheres (1998). While many friends often partake in meals together, it is this meal specifically, the after Sunday service lunch, that designates familial ties between the MCC community. Many Christians reserve Sundays as the “Lord’s” day, and therefore designate

it as a day to be spent with and among family. Many others may see Sundays as “me” time, allocating their time towards running errands, doing chores around the house, catching up on readings or TV, or even just taking the day for rest and self-care. The members of MCC actively choose to stay for the potluck on the third Sunday of every month rather than spend their lunchtime elsewhere. This family time becomes ritualized, as they are able to spend time with friends on many days of the week, but Sundays are the only days where the congregation is present together in its most complete form and represents a family day distinct from a nuclear family day. While some more recent anthropological theories of kinship have advocated for a separation between “biological” and “social” senses of kinship, prioritizing the social (Sahlins 2013), feminist anthropologists continue to argue that these distinctions are inappropriate to understanding varied sensibilities attached to “substance” (Carsten 2001; Franklin and McKinnon 2001), which presents a relation rather than a division between physical and biological matter and social meaning. The sharing of food through a monthly Sunday ritual at MCC highlights the ways in which physical substances (in this case food) create social meanings that bring folx together. The social meanings of the sharing of food are not one of just material sharing. In other words, it is not just through sharing of food that intimate ties are established. These ties have already been produced through shared senses of marginality of the gay and lesbian persons that form the congregation. Sharing is both material and social. Sharing creates space, but it also creates intimate ties toward a sensibility of family and ties that are predicated on *other* feelings of family.

Feelings about Family

Aside from Sunday morning services, monthly potlucks, monthly game nights, and now during pandemic times daily school activities, the church space is used in other ways for non-

religious gatherings. Every Monday night, a discussion group is held at the church, led by Rick. Topics in discussion vary greatly. One member desperately wishes to find a church that is welcoming but not labeled as a “gay” church in the manner that MCC is. This implies that acceptance of queer lifestyles has yet to be absorbed into mainstream Christian doctrines, at least within a local context, and therefore some gay Christians may still struggle to find acceptance when they do not want their sexual identity to dominate their religious spaces. This suggests that there may still be lingering guilt or tension internally with some older gay Christians as they seek to reconcile the importance of their faith with other aspects of their identity, in this case, their sexuality. This guilt is oftentimes not only associated with past religious trauma which can manifest in messages such as “gays go to hell”, but also often with familial trauma associated with the fear of coming out, unacceptance or disapproval after coming out, and (at times even more traumatic than religious condemnation) the social stigma of being gay in the mid to late twentieth century. As many of the congregation members of MCC Knoxville are older than 50, their moments of coming out to family and wider circles occurred during a time when homosexuality was associated with AIDS, resulting in a great deal of shame and stigma.

I was invited to participate in one of these discussion groups in October 2020 and this ethnographic opportunity allowed me much insight into how some members of MCC and its related social groups felt about their families and what coming out meant for them. Many of those who attended the group shared stories about coming out. David described his experience as being “kicked out of the closet” and dealing with trauma, guilt, and family backlash that culminated in a falling out with his sister when she angrily asked, “Did you think my love was conditional?!” because she felt betrayed that he had hid his sexuality from her for so long and didn’t feel he could confide in her, leading to another rupture within his family that continues

today. While his sister many have been understanding, the larger shame and stigma associated with homosexuality led David to hide, leading to a fall out that may have been prevented. Trauma, in this sense, forms a larger collective set of meanings for those in the gay South and in Knoxville – where it is not just actual lived experiences that lead to feelings of shame, but experiences learned from other’s or from wider social knowledge can lead to the internalization of feelings that belong to the whole collective. Being forced to confront one’s own sexuality within a familial setting that doesn’t support the “lifestyle” (as many have called it) prompts these feelings of guilt associated with gayness. Family – or rather birth family – then becomes a subject of pain and resentment, leading many to seek out new forms of family that manifest in places of queer communion, such as MCC and their respective social functions. As one member put it, “I never wanted to be like my family, but I still wanted to have a family.” Here family emerges as a site of pain but also a site of desire. The lack of commonality many gay people feel with their parents or siblings – “We just don’t have anything in common. I’m ‘friends’ with my mom now but I’ve tried to be friends with my sisters, and we have nothing in common” – leads them to seek out other sites of gay culture and communion to create kinship forming bonds in the form of queer family. The church, specifically MCC, emerges as a site of this kinship forming as it allows for a variety of manifestations of queer communion to coexist. “I enjoy going to church because you don’t have to be a ‘bible person’ or even a ‘Christian’ to feel accepted,” and other sentiments such as this reinforce the social and material aspects of MCC for many who crave queer social spaces and forms of intimacy that they can experience without shame.

Other members shared thoughts of depression, anxiety, and grief with the group through discussions of AIDS, pandemic life, and residual guilt based in their sexualities that oftentimes stems more from family trauma than religious trauma. This guilt frequently culminated in

moments of frustration even with confessions such as “This guilt takes up too much mental space, it seems like a huge waste of time to let these worries and guilt trouble you so much. But you can’t let *it* go...Gotta get rid of that fucking *guilt*!” While the church is the site of these discussions, they are typically non-religious in nature. Although led by Rick and attended by some church members, the majority of the attendees at these groups are not members of MCC, and many of them are not necessarily religious as several of them made sure to point out when introducing themselves to me and reiterated throughout the length of the discussion group. On Monday nights, the church becomes a place for gay communion where church members, those who see themselves as spiritual rather than religious, and those who hate religion entirely all gather together. Discussion topics are focused on matters of life (that are not necessarily religious) that can resonate with a wider queer audience. In this manner, MCC serves as locus of Knoxville’s queer subculture, especially for an older audience, one who may no longer feel comfortable in bars or clubs.

Through Knoxville’s lack of sites of socializing devoid of the connotation of nightlife or a university, MCC emerges as a location for queer communion, culture, and socialization, both with and without the context of religion. MCC caters to the desires of an aging queer community, one whom craves stability, comfort, and what Lisa Duggan has called “homonormativity” – or the notion of gay subcultures that are rooted in the possibilities of domesticity and consumerism upheld by heteronormativity – that they may not be able to find in other churches or community centers due to a lack of inclusivity, or simply a lack of solidarity (2002, 2003). Patrons utilize the services of MCC not only to fill religious needs, but social ones as well. This is seen through the attendance of game nights by non-church members, the loyalty of many to the discussion group despite never having attended an MCC Sunday morning service, and gay members of other, non

“gay” churches who see it as “a good way to meet others. Bars are more for young people and [we’re] not interested in hookups anymore.” The community built within MCC is one that is initially defined by sexual orientation or gender identity but is developed through kinship forming bonds. Church patrons may begin as acquaintances, quickly become friends, and are soon considered family.

My first Sunday at MCC is one of the few where children were present. In the back of the church are built in shelves, many of which are filled with children’s books, puzzles, coloring, pages, blocks, crayons, and markers among other toys. Two children play in the back of the church, their initial quiet coloring soon becomes a game of playful tag, with loud foot stomps and yells at each other. Their parents scold them, tell them to be quiet, but no one else seems to mind; in fact, people seem pleased by their energetic nature as smiles break out on many faces, including the pastor’s at their use of the church as a place of play and enjoyment. Soon after this, the music director’s infant son begins to cry during a song. Since she is occupied with the piano, a look of dread comes over her face but is soon replaced by relief. Someone else, at this time I am not sure who, gleefully runs over to the baby and commandeers the opportunity to get to hold and sooth him while his mom is working. The woman smiles as she coos to him and bounces him on her hip as she begins to walk around the room. Rather than annoyance, I detect joy as the consensus of the congregation, as they all seem to find children absolutely delightful. As I will continue to observe over the next several months, I will soon realize that there are very few children ever in attendance at MCC, so the congregation takes their presence as an extra special event. I gather that the presence of children reifies the idea of a nuclear, homonormative family, and that many parishioners may vicariously live through the children that do occasionally attend in order to fulfill familial desires if their life may be devoid of children

otherwise. While congregation members may go back to their own nuclear households, quiet without the sounds of children, the space of the church on these particular days provides an opportunity for a feeling of kinship, marking the church as a site of a more conventional family feeling than the private spaces of their respective homes.

Prior to many mornings, phrases like “Good morning sweet family” are shared with the community before the sermon starts. Comments like these directly affirm members’ commitment to the MCC congregation as their (chosen) family, potentially as a way of mediating the guilt and pain that may be associated with their birth family. These casual declarations often seem nonchalant and even second nature to those who utter them, but they reinforce the notion of the church family being one of love, acceptance, and joy rather than resentment, pain, and guilt. This is especially true for sermons that fall on or around Mothers’ and Fathers’ Day, when words like “mom” or “dad” can be a problematic notion for some and emphasis is placed on “acquired families” for those who associate pain and resentment with “birth” families. One sermon in particular delves into discussion of “Divine DNA”, and “seeing everyone as [our] siblings” through this shared DNA, not only genetically but spiritually. It is in this way that “God either loves everybody or nobody” and that Christians must do the same, regardless of what many gay people have been told. In this sense, the community of MCCCK queers Christianity, as they affirm the sexual and gender diversity that many other Christian groups condemn. Members of both the global MCC community as well as the global gay/queer community are referred to as siblings, whether they are part of MCC or not. This becomes apparent on Transgender Day of Remembrance, when we all take a moment of silence to “remember our trans siblings whom we’ve lost this year” as a slideshow is played with faces and names of all those trans people who have been murdered over the course of the year.

While many church congregations may refer to themselves as a family – a family within and through Christ – MCC’s conception of family is highly complex. Not only do parishioners have original, or “birth” families to contend with, which are often associated with guilt and negativity. They also have their chosen, queer (nuclear) families. This chosen family may somewhat overlap with the church congregation, although this is not always true. These nuclear, queer families are mostly based in couples and occasionally children, although the members of MCC who do have children tend to have adult children who no longer live with them and therefore do not attend services with them. As Christians, they may also see themselves as a family with a global Christian community, which is larger but still encompasses the global MCC “community”. Then there is the real community of MCC Knoxville which functions as a family through various material forms of sharing, networks of care, and reciprocity. While the congregation may see themselves as a family through and within Christ, they also exist as a queer family, a family that is chosen rather than assigned, one that represents many of the struggles faced by queer individuals globally. Many members of MCC attend services or small group discussions with their primary chosen family, their partner, whom, as I mentioned earlier, may or may not be legally married to them. However, once indoctrinated into this very specific community, an additional level of queer family is developed, one based in social bonds, solidarity, and shared trauma. Many patrons of MCCs globally actually discover their primary partners at MCCs, such as the church’s current pastor and intern, who both met their partners at their home MCCs before coming to work at MCCK, making this sense of family one that is even deeper. MCC is a global network with churches worldwide, and the denomination is based on an idea of a global community of individuals being tied to and connected with one another, even though many will never meet those outside of their home congregation. This idea of a family as

preached by MCC's denominational ideology differs from the family that exists within MCC Knoxville, as it is small enough that all regular members do know each other, and many know each other intimately. This very real community is not only rooted in a distinct ideology or adherence to Christian values while living as a sexual or gender minority, but also within a material reality of knowing each other and sharing in time, space, and emotional intimacies with each other.

Until March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic began, this sense of queer family was exemplified through the social and physical interactions of MCC, especially within the context of sharing: sharing meals on the third Sunday of every month, or every single Sunday in my own experience, sharing stories, feelings, and thoughts within the context of small group discussions with personal anecdotes, and sharing touches, both with partners and with friends, whether friendly or sexual. As I've observed within the context of church functions, touch manifests in many ways, from hand holding during prayers to hand holding for no other reason than to be touching, to quick side hugs and long embraces, to kisses on cheeks, foreheads, and mouths with both intimate, sexual partners and close friends. For me, this intimacy truly culminates within the moment of individual communion, as a friend (or potential stranger in my case) places a hand on your shoulder in prayer while another friend (or another stranger) places a wafer and juice in your mouth – as I myself was brought into the intimate fold of the space during my first visit, which I described in the introduction of this thesis. The intimacy of allowing another individual to feed you is based in a sense of trust and care, potentially even love. While communion is rooted in the idea of Jesus' love for his disciples and the world, it manifests through the love of the congregation for one another and in the context of this queer family space, communion becomes less abstract and more physically substantial.

Community, Love, and Loss

It is Sunday November 24, 2019. I have now been attending MCC a little over a month. Seeing as it is the fourth Sunday of the month, there is no monthly potluck today. After the service concludes I stand to the side with Bob and Sadwrn as Rick makes his rounds. He always has to say hello to everyone, but Bob does not share that same need, so he and I stand back waiting. We don't talk while we wait; Rick is the social one, the conversation starter. Bob likes to sit in silence, like me, so neither of us are uncomfortable standing awkwardly together out of the way while Rick hugs and kisses everyone he can get his hands on. At this point, it's become a bit of a tradition as this is how most Sundays go. When he's done, he comes over and asks, "Cheddar's okay?" to which I reply "Of course" with a smirk. It's always Cheddar's, it seems to be a congregation favorite. I have no idea why, maybe because it's close to the church. I asked once and was told it's because they can accommodate large parties and lots of people used to go there from church together. But now it's just Rick and Bob and me and whomever Rick decides to invite that week. "Debbie and Laura are joining us" he says. I have yet to meet Debbie and Laura so I'm excited for the opportunity.

We get to Cheddar's and for the first time chose to sit inside because it's begun to get cold. Sadwrn will have to wait in the car this time rather than join us on the patio like usual. We meet up with Debbie and Laura, a lesbian couple probably in their late fifties or early sixties, at the hostess stand. I had not noticed them at the service. The hostess shows us to our table. It's busy today, mostly because of the after-church rush but we are still seated immediately. The five of us slide into a booth and I think how curious we must look to the rest of the families all seated around us: an elderly gay couple in their seventies, a slightly younger lesbian couple, and me, a twenty something fifth wheel (Matt is out of town for work this week so I'm solo).

I order the same thing I do every week (“Let me guess, mac n’ cheese?!” Rick teases before I place my order), as do Rick and Bob. I wonder why the monotony doesn’t bother them, how they can’t get bored coming here every single Sunday, eating the same meal (Bob always wearing his brown tweed blazer) but I suppose it’s become quite comfortable for them. I am introduced to Debbie and Laura formally, and I learn they drive here all the way from Madisonville. They had been regular attendees of MCC a while ago but did not like the two most recent pastors. So, they decided to go to a United Methodist Church instead but had issues with larger denominational ideologies. Now they come back to MCC every once in a while, but it’s a long drive and they’re still not sure if they like Colleen yet. After this Sunday I do not see them again. This discussion with Debbie and Laura prompts Rick to pipe up again.

“He used to be the pastor here you know” Rick said gesturing to Bob, “but that was a long time ago”.

“Lots of things have changed since then....” Bob replies with a sigh, looking off into the distance with a slight sadness in his eyes.

“What happened?” I ask, half curious and half scared of what feelings my question might bring up. I know these events and insights will be important to my project, but I can’t bear the thought of causing Rick and Bob any pain.

“They wanted me out.” Bob says. “She didn’t like my being here after I retired. She felt threatened, so we had to leave for a bit, but now we’re back.”

I can only assume that the “she” he’s referring to is the pastor that became his successor after he retired, the one that I hear people talk about from time to time, the one that nobody seems to have liked while she was here (including Debbie and Laura as I have just recently learned). Once Rick informed me that “She wasn’t even gay!”. I constantly wonder why she was

hired in the first place if she was such an ill fit. But it seems to me that sometimes you have to take what you can get, and apparently when Bob stepped down, she was what the church could get.

“So where did you go? What did you do?” I ask with genuine wonder.

“We went to the Methodist Church.” Rick says, “The one out in Madisonville, the same one Debbie and Laura were attending.”

“We really loved it there.” He tells me, “The congregation was so kind and accepting.”

“Then why did you leave?” I inquire, “Why come back here after being forced out?”

“Well, they hired a new pastor here, one that was fine with Bob and I being here. But that’s only part of the reason,” he pauses and struggles through his next sentence. “We really had to leave because of the Methodist Church, what they were saying and doing in the administration. It just didn’t sit right with us and we couldn’t be a part of something that believed that, no matter how much the individual people loved us and how well they treated us, no matter how much they begged us to stay. They said to us ‘But we don’t care, you can stay! We love you all!’ But that wasn’t enough. It wasn’t about them it was about the Church. We had to do what was right for us and coming back here was what’s right.” While the real community at this Methodist Church had been accepting, the larger, imagined community of the United Methodist Church had not, which is where the crux of this issue for Rick and Bob truly lives.

I nod as I listen intently, trying to nonverbally show my appreciation for all that they are sharing with me. We talk about other people in the church who’ve had similar experiences (including the one that Debbie and Laura had just shared with me) and the conversation somehow turns to AIDS. Normally very quiet as he allows Rick to do most of the talking, Bob perks up and I can tell he is still very passionate about all the work he did with arK when he had

still been the MCC pastor. He begins to tell me stories about how they had covert operations planned with a sympathetic pharmacist. The story begins in medias res and the dates Bob throws out continue to change as he struggles to recall the pharmacist's name. They would meet the pharmacist after hours to get antiviral drugs that Bob and other volunteers would then distribute to people in the community, all behind closed doors for fear of arrest. It's hard for me to empathize with them because I have never lost someone to AIDS and I do not hold the traumatic memories of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but Rick and Bob certainly do. I wonder if they have always been so incredibly kind, or if maybe some of their kindness was inspired by the persistent loss of friends and queer family. This discussion of AIDS leads into other discussions of all the people whose lives Rick and Bob have touched at MCCs not only all-over East Tennessee, but all over the country as well. When lunch is over and we've each paid our own bills, we walk to our cars. Debbie and Laura exchange pleasantries as they mention getting back on the road to get home since it's such a long drive. Rick gives me a hug with a "Can't wait to see you next week!" I respond with "Me too!" and then, with slight hesitation in his voice, as I'm walking to my car he calls out "Love you!" and I surprise myself when I respond, "Love you too!"

It is possible that this propensity for love that Rick and Bob have not only shown me, but to all people they seem to come across, is developed through a lifetime of loss and is a means of forming solidarity with allies in a world that may too often feel alienating. Watching friends and queer family members die may cause one to cherish new relationships more strongly and quickly than most. Rick and Bob's extensive activist work both during the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the aftermath in which they continue today reveals their dedication to this cause. Although never explicitly stated, I can infer that not only based on how long they've been alive, but how much of their lives they dedicated to bringing awareness to and fighting AIDS, they have probably

experienced loss more than most. This propensity for loss may manifest in an attempt to continuously grow one's own social networks. The discussion group I attended exists because Rick has dedicated so much time to running and cultivating it, with most members being personally invited by (and often staying because of) him. One couple who attends who do not go to MCC informed me that "Rick sucked us in and they [Rick and Bob] are some of our oldest friends here [in East Tennessee]." MCC's continuation in Knoxville and its existence in Johnson City are because of Bob. Had Rick and Bob not latched onto me during my first day at MCC, this project may not exist. By continuously devoting so much time and effort to creating and maintaining sites of material queer communion, Rick and Bob have established networks of kinship and solidarity, both within the context of MCC and beyond, in order to potentially create a larger sense of family to make up for the ones they have lost. In the next chapter, I will explore the ways in which my field community has experienced the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980's and beyond and how the shared memory of trauma is potentially reflected in their current understandings of relationships and their queer and religious communities. Pairing the experiences of living through one epidemic to find themselves in yet another global pandemic, the COVID-19 crisis, I will explore the ways in which the patrons of MCC may in fact be experiencing COVID-19 as a continuation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, as they were both then and now some of the most vulnerable populations demographically.

CHAPTER TWO

AIDS AND COVID: TRAUMATIC MEMORIES AND CONTINUED EXPERIENCES

Although the COVID pandemic has triggered traumatic memories for numerous gays and lesbians, the pain of HIV/AIDS has prepared many to deal with pandemics in ways that those communities who did not experience loss via AIDS were not prepared for. MCC as a denomination experienced severe (uncountable) losses due to AIDS, mainly in the form of male leaders according to Reverend Colleen during our interview, but now during COVID they are more globally connected thanks to digital technologies. Many MCCs, including MCC Knoxville, developed complex networks of care during AIDS which they have reappropriated in order to deal with many of the challenges that COVID poses, such as grocery drop offs, weekly phone calls for support, and even financial aid to help with hospital bills for those who may be isolated or alone. AIDS was marked by heightened political action for many gays and lesbians as they vocalized their pain and grievances against the government. COVID has disrupted that sense of activism, as it is harder to meet and organize in a virtual world. While many churches nationally may have begun meeting in person, MCCs have chosen to stay virtual as many members (especially those at MCC Knoxville) have compromised immune systems, and many MCCs do not wish to relive the loss that they are more than familiar with. Most MCC activism has been significantly scaled back, as limited numbers of volunteers are allowed in the building for their food preparation ministry. During the BLM protests of the Summer of 2020, many parishioners would express frustrations during virtual church services at their inability to attend larger demonstrations for fear of risking their health with questions like “Does anybody have suggestions for *other* ways we can help?”

One Sunday in the Summer of 2020 I decided to stay on after the service for the roughly ten minutes of dedicated social time. That morning we had been talking about the protests happening all over the country, the injustices of the government against racial minorities, and the Black Lives Matter movement that had been dominating the news. Since we had begun Zooming for sermons back in March, we had several new members to the church who were patrons of Colleen's previous church in Texas. They were in attendance every week and we had gotten to know them as they were becoming familiar. During our social time after pleasantries were shared one of the Texas attendees, Jennifer, asked if those church members in Knoxville had been protesting. A few muttered that they had but the responses from local congregation members were mostly along the lines of "not publicly, no" as many members feared the inherent risk of being in such large groups, and therefore had personally chosen to abstain from the public protests occurring throughout the city that summer. Someone asked Jennifer back if she had been protesting in Texas and once they paused for her response she broke out into tears.

"No!" she cried "I'm so frustrated. I want to go out and protest, but I just feel like I can't!" she continued. "I've been doing everything else I can think of" she said while dabbing her eyes with a tissue, her partner sitting beside her with a solemn expression. "I'm just so upset; I want to be out there with those kids making a statement, but it just feels too dangerous right now. I've been connecting with people online and trying to get the word out but it's just not the same." There seemed to be guilt associated with her pain, she and her partner were both white and had the luxury of being able to stay home during the pandemic to minimize the risk of either of them getting sick. I watched as she cried and wondered how many protests she had been a part of during her lifetime, how integral activism and social justice were to her sense of identity?

“Maybe I should be out there” she went on, “doing something instead of sitting here.” Her anger was tangible, and I empathized with her. Matt and I had the privilege of protesting that summer, we did not have to weigh the concern of catching COVID and bringing it home to an aging partner. I wished there was something I could say to make her feel better, but that did not feel like my place. Her partner comforted her while the subject was changed, and patrons returned to sharing pleasantries with one another.

This emotional moment reveals the inherent need for many within MCC to be politically and socially active. While AIDS brought people together and mobilized them for political action, the overarching feeling is that COVID’s need for isolation has driven people apart from their typical expressions of activism. Church members often bring up alternative means of activism they have found during the pandemic to fill that void in their life, such as volunteering with phone trees to support not only those struggling with COVID but the BLM movement as well and other online communities they have connected with such as grassroots organizations helping to register people to vote prior to the 2020 election. While these activities do not hold the same weight for some as actually marching in protests or going door to door with petitions or campaign information, due to the circumstances they represent the ways in which activism has manifested through mostly virtual means. For many in the community, these activities help to take their mind off of the larger socio-political problems of the pandemic and help them to feel like they are still contributing to causes they are passionate about, something that has been so ingrained in this community, as noted by both Reverend Collen and MCC’s intern Camille during their interviews. In this chapter, I aim to explore the question of how COVID evokes feelings of AIDS for the MCC community? What kind of tension is created by the potentially linear relationship between COVID and AIDS for this community? Is COVID bringing people

together in similar ways as AIDS did, or is the need for quarantine and isolation driving people apart? Is COVID disrupting queer subcultures in similar ways that AIDS did and requiring a reconceptualization of queer family and queer homes, or is it reinforcing a sense of togetherness?

Activism as Community: MCC Against AIDS

MCC Knoxville's origins are ones that are based largely in efforts and placed importance on political activism. In 1985, the year that Bob became pastor of MCC Knoxville, aRK (aids Response Knoxville) was started as a ministry through the church. The main purpose of aRK was to provide "education to the community on aids and support persons with aids or arc² and their friends and families. aRK trains persons as buddies, trains persons working on the helpline, and does professional in-service training for social workers, nurses, and alcohol and drug counselors. aRK also provides housing and food for persons with aids," as stated in the document "History of M.C.C. – Knoxville, Tennessee" from 1991. AIDS activism became ingrained in the political agenda of MCC during the 1980s and beyond, with documentation of participation in the International Candlelight Memorial Service in remembrance of those who died and who lived with AIDS on Memorial Day of 1986. In September of that same year MCCCK participated in the AIDS VIGIL OF PRAYER and held special worship services accompanied by 50 hours' worth of prayer for those affected by AIDS as noted in the same document, "History of M.C.C. – Knoxville, Tennessee", from 1991.

In 1987, aRK became an independent organization and was no longer under the umbrella of MCCCK, although the two organizations would remain closely linked. During this time, the church continued to support aRK through monetary gifts, members' volunteer hours, and the expertise of Bob, who served as the organization's coordinator and President of the Board in

² AIDS-related complex

both 1987 and 1988. Over the next several years the church would receive local and regional recognition for their work with AIDS, including TV specials on local news channels and collaborative events with other area churches including St. John's Episcopal Church of Christ. A church timeline reveals that MCC lost its first member to AIDS in 1988.

In July of 1990, tragedy struck in the form of a fire. At the time, the church was using a building at 1320 Central Street, where an office for aRK was also located. The church building was broken into in the early morning of July 16th where an arsonist set fire to the building, but also deliberately broke into Bob's office in order to set fire to his pastoral robes. The aftermath of this led the building to be "deemed a total loss" but both MCC and aRK "were able to save most all of their furnishings and equipment" as noted by the same 1991 document. While the arsonist may have been trying to send a deliberate message, several weeks after the fire both MCC and aRK received an influx of support from the local area in the form of both verbal as well as financial support as the offices and materials were moved to a new space. The 1991 "History of M.C.C.-Knoxville, Tennessee" document reveals "What was meant to destroy, renewed our faith and action."

AIDS activism has been important to many MCCs and members of MCC outside of Knoxville. Before coming to Knoxville, while in seminary in London, Ontario, Colleen lived in an activist house associated with the Body Politic Archive and helped to establish an AIDS organization. After finishing seminary, she moved to Kingston, Ontario where she held the position of part-time pastor and public AIDS educator, establishing the church as an "activist church". She then moved to the MCC in Dallas to continue AIDS ministry during the 1980s when the AIDS crisis was on the uprise. From there she went to Denton, TX where she stayed for ten years and continued AIDS outreach. She noted in our interview that "churches became

important spaces for people with AIDS trying to find a purpose after recovery.” It was during this time that networks of care – “gay people taking care of gay people” – began to emerge as a pillar of MCC’s commitment to activism, solidarity, and their chosen families.

Many members of MCC today tell stories about feeling isolated in their youth or during their coming out from both their home churches and their birth families. As explored in the previous chapter, MCC becomes a place of acceptance and family for those who have been forsaken or banished from their birth families. During the AIDS crisis, this need for a safe space was amplified for many gays who may not have been religious at all, but who needed a family to take care of them. Patrons of MCC took it upon themselves to care for, house, feed, and love these people whether they were part of the church community or not because “we make family where we are” as noted by Colleen during our interview, and for many HIV positive gays, queer churches like MCC were some of the only places they could go. The church opened its doors, as many members of the church opened their doors at home as well, to those suffering from AIDS who had virtually no other options. It was during this time that Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas became holidays that were not reserved for a biological or birth family, but rather were dedicated to both chosen families and extended gay networks, as Rick and Bob, Colleen and her wife, and many others opened their homes for special meals to any and all who needed a place to go. In 2020, COVID disrupted those traditions, as homes could not be opened to strangers or acquaintances, or for many, to extended family at all. This brought back feelings of isolation for single and older patrons of the church, as the “communal togetherness and connection”, as noted by Colleen during our interview, that had become so important to many during the AIDS pandemic, sparked by the necessity of care, was unable to be realized for most as potlucks were canceled, all events were indefinitely postponed, and sermons were moved to

virtual platforms rapidly. Rather than host an open Thanksgiving as they typically would have, Colleen and her family were forced to dine alone, just the three of them, and call friends and chosen family to check in rather than enjoy a meal together and chat across the table. The challenges brought on by COVID, most notably the emphasis on isolation to prevent transmission, might be understood as a continuation of the challenges of HIV/AIDS, at least in the example of the MCC community. However, this continuation might also be disrupted by the sense of closeness experienced during AIDS as people came together to take up political action, while this type of mobilization during COVID has been almost impossible for vulnerable communities like MCC.

COVID vs. AIDS

It is March of 2020 and I've just finished eating lunch with Rick, Bob, Colleen, and a church visitor at the McAlister's in West Knoxville. The service that morning was odd as chairs were all placed at least three feet apart rather than right next to each other, and we were advised not to move them closer to anyone unless we cohabitated with that person. That morning I sat alone. Communion was also different. Everyone serving washed their hands and wore gloves. We were handed a wafer and an individual cup of juice rather than being served the wafer as usual. It felt less personal, less intimate, and I didn't care for it. It reminded me too much of communions growing up, the ones where not everyone was welcome at the table, unlike the intended affirmation of any and all in attendance of the MCC communion table. Rick and Bob still wanted to get lunch after the service and selected McAlister's because it was close and would be quick. Maybe they were concerned there would be too many people at Cheddar's this afternoon for it to be safe. I of course didn't object and agreed to go wherever they preferred. When we arrived, there was hardly anyone there which was odd for an early Sunday afternoon

in West Knox. It was cold outside and there was a strange feeling in the air, something felt off and the atmosphere was tense, heavy with anxiety surrounding the novel coronavirus that had been all over the news. It wasn't hard to find a table big enough for the five of us to properly socially distance.

We talked about the usual stuff for a while, our visitor Drew was a student at a Christian school nearby and was intrigued by MCC's mission, although he himself was not gay, but rather came out of curiosity to see what a "gay" church would look like. He asked questions about how MCC is similar and different from "typical" denominations and Rick and Bob informed him of all the details that they originally divulged to me when we first met, such as where and how the church started, both as a denomination in California and as an individual church within Knoxville. They talked about how long they'd been involved in the church and Bob's religious journey as he struggled to find an accepting seminary along with MCC's mission statement and what it meant to them. I sat quietly and ate my sandwich, feeling distracted that day as everything felt "off". We finished our meal and made our way to the parking lot. Both Drew and Colleen took off as they had other things to attend to. Rick, Bob, and I staggered behind for a minute. We said goodbye, not knowing it would be our last time seeing each other in person for a while. Instead of hugging like we usually would, we bumped elbows as everyone had been recommending, but it was not the same, and left me feeling unsatisfied as we parted ways.

I felt scared, and from the discussions I had been a part of and overheard that day, it was what everyone else felt as well; an overwhelming sense of dread and fear loomed over our heads like a rain cloud about to burst. Both old and new friends left the service that day with a heavy feeling of uncertainty, and there was no way for any of us to know that it would be our last time physically together for an indefinite amount of time. The fear that everyone felt was only

magnified by the alternative, a life lived online, in the confines of one's own home, isolated from the church family that, for many, had become a necessity. This Sunday morning ritual was one of the few times MCC members were able to get out of the house and socialize. That being taken away by intangible forces was a frustrating feeling to say the least. The reality for many members of MCC was that once confined to their homes, the detriments of social isolation would soon set in as many live alone or with a single partner. MCC was one of the few places of queer subculture within Knoxville, along with a few bars and a university center, all of which COVID would take away in its first city-wide shutdown. For those older members of MCC who had grown up in times where a life out of the closet, an authentic life, was not feasible, having their most necessary sites of social interaction and shared experience stripped from them by the government may have felt like a more personal attack than for many other Americans who had the luxury of frequenting many sites of social engagement.

As Rick and Bob drove home that afternoon, their four-legged child in the backseat having no idea the fear they felt, I imagine they discussed possible outcomes and what their own potential reactions may be. Based on our previous conversations, I can assume that they both knew they were vulnerable, primarily due to their old age. But Rick worried more heavily about Bob than himself, seeing as Bob's many underlying health issues put him at an even higher risk. Rick had told me that simply making it to all of Bob's doctor's appointments was challenging enough already, now adding a new, mysterious virus to their life would present even more obstacles. I knew they revisited the conversation we had earlier that day about the cruise they had booked for the summer; would they still be able to go in August? And even if they could go, would it really be safe? But at this precise moment, their ocean bound vacation quickly became less important than more pertinent issues.

Perhaps Bob said, "It feels like it did in the eighties," to Rick from the passenger seat, as Rick mindlessly drove them home. "Except this time, it's not just us, it's everybody. The irony of it all...."

And perhaps Rick replied with "But they still see us as expendable...deemed as dispensable." shaking his head in disbelief and frustration. "Our lives still don't mean anything to them. Maybe we should be the ones hoarding hand sanitizer and selling it for twenty or so dollars a bottle!"

I imagine they both chuckled at the absurdity of the man who had been hoarding hand sanitizer in his garage and selling it for a profit on Amazon that we had all mused about earlier at lunch.

Maybe Bob remarked "Well, we survived AIDS, Lord willing we'll survive this too" as he took Rick's hand with a worried smile, the way he often did.

Conceivably they both sat quietly for the rest of the ride home, each one lost in thought about what might happen to the other. They had so many memories of death, the countless number of funerals that Bob had performed during his initial years as pastor of MCC, when that virus was taking lives of not only gay men, but women, children, and non-gays as well. As they pulled in the driveway, Sadwrn might have sat up with a yawn, excited to be home. They got out of the car and made their way into the house. Rick may have turned on the TV for background noise and the news appeared. Dan Patrick, the Lieutenant Governor of Texas was making a comment that seniors should be willing to die for the sake of the economy. Bob might not have heard this, as he was potentially still in the kitchen, feeding Sadwrn the rest of his leftover lunch. Rick probably would have turned the TV off quickly and thought to himself, "How can they believe we are simply expendable?" I imagine he walked to the kitchen where Bob stood and

smiled at him, trying to push the painful thoughts from his mind. “Let’s take Sadwrn for a walk.” he would have suggested, as they so often did. They may have left the house together to try and clear their heads.

Upon first glance, COVID and AIDS are vastly different pandemics – different death rates, different symptoms, and different demographics affected. However, for an aging LGBTQ+ population, COVID feels far too familiar as senses of isolation and loss are prevalent characteristics of both pandemics. The collective trauma of AIDS has made the members of MCC more sensitive to the implications of COVID, including its strain on physical and emotional intimacy and its limitations on social relationships. The history of AIDS in Knoxville is one that not only affected queer populations, but IV drug users, homeless populations, and eventually women, children, and straight men as well.

For an aging population of gay and lesbian Americans, a global pandemic such as COVID-19 may bring up painful and traumatic memories of the HIV/AIDS crisis of their younger years. As the pandemic continues to go on, with little being known about its symptoms, long-term effects, and longevity during its initial onset, significant similarities and stark differences emerge when compared to HIV/AIDS. These comparisons became evident near the beginning of the pandemic, and as it has gone on there have been more similarities and differences that arise with time. Those who survived the HIV/AIDS epidemic have a unique perspective in understanding what it means to live through an epidemic, especially one that is viral and arguably mismanaged by the federal government. The irony of having already survived one pandemic is that those who were the most vulnerable population then due to sexual activity and stigma have now arrived at a point in life where they are again most vulnerable due to age and underlying health conditions.

Stigma emerges as a common denominator between the two pandemics as different senses of stigma take hold. “There was so much stigma around AIDS, no one wanted others to know. COVID stigma is different....but still the question ‘but how did *you* get it?’ is happening a lot now,” Colleen mentioned to me during our formal interview. With AIDS, a positive status meant a death sentence, in a social sense, but in a literal sense as well. With so little known about the virus towards the beginning of its global debut, gay people faced even harsher discrimination as many refused to even touch them, simply through a handshake or even a monetary transaction at a gas station. The misinformation and lack of knowledge that defined the AIDS pandemic again emerges in this age of COVID, with fear of how it is transmitted, if it can survive on surfaces, and if it can be passed via inanimate objects. Touch again becomes important as COVID has made it so we can only touch those deemed safe to us, those we cohabitate with, or those we are willing to risk an infection in order to touch. During the AIDS crisis, there was a fear of telling people one was positive not only because of the associated stigma, but for the fear of isolation, of having to be isolated from friends, family, and loved ones – of no longer being touched. Again, in the time of COVID, fear of isolation exists but seems to have less serious implications as many have not taken safety precautions seriously, thus leading to isolation through stay-at-home orders, quarantines, and restrictions on social gatherings and businesses, such as restaurants, clubs, and bars. In the following chapter I will explore the effects of the COVID pandemic on queer subcultures, queer intimacy, and the queer kinship introduced in chapter one.

A positive status, of either HIV/AIDS or COVID, is associated with societal victim blaming, as the question of how did you get it, where did you get it, and who did you get it from emerges, although the weight these questions hold pale in comparison to the weight of stigma

surrounding the contraction of AIDS through improper sexual means or IV drug use. While these questions may be important for contact tracing efforts, where, how, or who does not change the reality of having the disease. For AIDS, a disease that was dubbed a “gay problem” nationally and seen as a form of damnation for those who lived a “bad life” in Knoxville, a positive status was seen as not only a punishment from God, but a death sentence as well. Some church members have made connections between the voices of judgement during the AIDS crisis and similar voices in relation to COVID during both interviews and casual conversations, including remarks such as “everyone wants to know ‘how or where did you get it?’” as highlighted by Colleen during our interview. These mental connections between the two pandemics suggest an earlier trauma triggered by the contemporary virus in question. This suggests that the gay community of MCC who has been subjected to so much judgement – from society, from their families, and from religion – is more sensitive to social judgements related to COVID, despite COVID and AIDS having different severities of stigma attached to the actions required to contract the virus (getting COVID from going to the grocery store versus getting AIDS from using unclean needles for drugs or having unprotected, promiscuous sex certainly have different associations with stigma, even today).

While contact tracing was also an important aspect of the HIV/AIDS crisis, it has become a prominent component of battling COVID. However, as noted by Collen during our interview, “it [contact tracing] doesn’t have the same punitive tones as it did back then” as previous contact tracing efforts revolved around victim blaming and demonization of sexual activities, mostly for gay men or MSM³. While a sense of stigma may link the two pandemics in a basic sense, the

³ Men who have sex with men.

stigma surrounding AIDS was far more severe, with AIDS being related to sexual deviance and drug use, which at the time were societal marks of being a “bad person”.

Images play an important role in memory and can be directly linked to internalized trauma, such as the collective memory and trauma of those who lived through, and lost, during the HIV/AIDS crisis. COVID continues to influence what Ann Cvetkovich calls “trauma culture”, or the public archival of accounts of trauma that influence the domain of the everyday and transcend the public/private divide, among those gays and lesbians who remember the loss of the 1980s and beyond (2003). This trauma culture is especially prevalent among gay clergy. COVID’s prominence on local, national, and global media is a constant reminder of disease, death, loss, and grief through the persistent images of hospitals, clinics, and healthcare workers. “It brought back all of those memories, images of gurneys in hallways” said Colleen during our interview in reference to COVID’s global visibility, memories of isolation, those infected dying in hospital rooms alone, or abandoned by their families, oftentimes only surrounded by their gay or chosen families. When COVID began, Colleen revealed during our interview that many MCC clergy nationwide feared that it would be similar to the way it was at the beginning of AIDS, with numerous funerals, one after another, too many to be counted. For some clergy that has become a reality, but luckily within MCC Knoxville so far there have only been three cases of COVID and no deaths. There are still fears within the larger network of MCC churches, since they as a denomination are better acquainted with a sense of loss than many other churches. There is a fear that leaders will be lost again, as many young leaders of MCC were lost in the 1980s to AIDS. Questions posed by Colleen during our interview like “How many will we have lost when we come back?” define the fear of what life will be like in a post-pandemic world, where the new normal may include a reckoning of all the lives lost.

A massive difference between the two pandemics is the emphasis on a treatment from the government, with a COVID treatment being developed rapidly while HIV/AIDS was defined by a slow effort to find a viable treatment, characterizing it as a genocide by the U.S. government (Kramer 1985; Finkelstein et al. 1986). According to Colleen, for HIV, “gay men were expendable, but lesbians could be saved with a good man” showing that the emphasis of blame was placed largely on homosexual men. During COVID, it has become clear from some in the government that the elderly population, the one who is most vulnerable, is also the most expendable for the sake of saving the economy and achieving herd immunity. Statements along this sentiment issued by Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick in the Spring of 2020 trigger memories of similar statements made by government officials amidst the AIDS crisis. These statements provoke thoughts such as “Here you go again trying to get rid of me”, said by Colleen during our formal interview in reference to the government’s stance on both gays and the elderly, and played into the initial fear that those over age seventy-five may not receive a vaccine once it had been developed. Many patrons of MCC have commented on the continued injustices of the U.S. government during sermons that deal with discrimination and biases related to BLM, violence against trans individuals, and the continued lack of governmental competency related to COVID. These feelings often come up during the designated social time following sermons, with Camille joking that “at least that’s consistent” during our formal interview in reference to the government’s response (of lack thereof) to both AIDS and COVID.

Resilience

The response of MCC Knoxville to the COVID crisis is based in a necessary resilience that was developed during the AIDS crisis “because we weren’t getting help anywhere else” as noted by Colleen during our formal interview. This led to the sophisticated and vital networks of

care that continue to define MCC Knoxville as they see themselves as a family that must take care of one another, especially in times of need such as this one. Camille highlighted this resilience during our formal interview when she said, “We are such a social community because that’s how we found a way to survive” in reference to the AIDS crisis and the emphasis on the ongoing activism of the church today. This demonstrates the continued effects of AIDS on the community that has been developed at MCC, where familial ties not only sustain relationships and social needs but help to sustain and maintain life in the most serious sense. It is the trauma of AIDS that led MCC to be prepared to face another crisis, although this preparation does not lessen the pain, fear, and loss that is associated with the 1980s and beyond. The networks of care that were created out of necessity during a time when many might have died on the streets had it not been for queer family are the ones that continue today to strengthen the kinship ties and relationships of MCC parishioners. They may in fact see each other as family because for many of them, it was the MCC community who assumed the role of family when it was needed most during the first health crises they faced via HIV/AIDS. Now because of COVID, that sense of family is being challenged as many of these “family” members do not cohabitate, thus forcing the MCC community to be creative in the ways that they maintain their familial relationships with one another in a time of required nuclear isolation, as I will take up in the following chapter.

Art and AIDS: Knoxville and Beyond

As part of their commitment to AIDS activism, MCC and arK also tackled this issue through various media, including art. In 1990, just five years after its creation in 1985, the AIDS Memorial Quilt made its debut in Knoxville from August 17-26 at the Knoxville Museum of Art (KMA) that had only recently opened its current building, making the AIDS quilt one of the first exhibitions to be held at the museum’s current location. The exhibition was made possible by the



Figure 2.1 Rick and Bob viewing the AIDS quilt during its first visit to Knoxville in 1990.

Photo used with permission of Rick Sawyer and Bob Galloway. Photo courtesy of Voices Out Loud archive, UT Libraries, University of Tennessee.

efforts of Bob through arK and MCC and was rounded out with lectures and a multitude of church services in order to commemorate East Tennesseans who had been lost to AIDS. The quilt's display was accompanied by a memorial service held at Church Street UMC. Aside from Church Street UMC and MCC, there were also representatives from other United Methodist Churches, the National Baptist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, the Knoxville Christian Fellowship, and the Conservative and Reformed Jewish synagogues ("MCC Timeline"). Over 240 of the quilt's then 12,000 squares were displayed in the museum's atrium. At the close of the exhibition, new panels were presented in honor of those members of Knoxville and East Tennessee who had died.⁴

Knoxville's response to AIDS was documented by gay photographer Jan Lynch, whose photojournalistic pieces are today one of the most well-known artifacts within gay political activism and pride within East Tennessee. Lynch died of AIDS prematurely in 1996, but his photographs of drag queens, pride parades, AIDS rallies, and queer Knoxvilleans live on. His artistic and political contributions to the fight against the AIDS crisis show in images what those at MCC and at arK were doing to create communities and establish gay families. Lynch's photos not only portray queer subculture candidly, but humanize those captured through showing them in an artistic and beautiful yet perceivably real way. His photos show the outcasts and exiled as fully realized individuals, and the haptic nature of the photos – both in the sense of subjects touching as well as a viewer touching the physical photo – reveals a vibrancy and resilience in face of both collective and individual traumas. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, touch, or the lack thereof, is a major component of not only the AIDS epidemic but the COVID-19 pandemic

⁴ *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, August 24, 1990.

as well, especially to members of gay communities where large portions of gay subculture were, and continue to be, defined by physical touch. The haptic, or multiple forms of touch as noted by Tina Campt, can create alternative modes of comprehending of temporalities, especially within the context of photographic archives (2012, 2017). In this sense, queer archives such as the Voices Out Loud archive and others represent links to queer pasts and queer intimacies, especially when touch is so heavily regulated. The present moment (COVID times) however requires that the physical archive remain closed, as it is too risky to touch materials. While I was once able to touch the physical copy of the photo on page 52, the haptic memories it represents are no longer physically tangible, at least not for the time being. The photo itself plays on the notions of touch as the only people touching in the photo are Rick and Bob (see embracing couple, dead center). The quilt, which was made through touch, now cannot be touched as it becomes a work of art and is displayed. Those viewing the quilt can only “touch” it visually, just as the photo above can only be accessed virtually.

The isolation felt by many during AIDS is magnified by the necessitated isolation of COVID. Digital archives represent one way that community members can relive the past and access information and memories when their collective memories have been disrupted by mandatory periods of isolation and a lack of socialization. However, digital technologies and virtual means of socialization and communication have been some of the most prominent components of the COVID-19 crisis globally. In the next chapter, I will explore how these technologies are both helping and hindering the MCC community as they continue to grapple with feelings of loss, isolation, and fear. I will investigate the ways in which COVID has altered queer intimacy and the ways that intimacy has manifested in this specific queer community in light of being stuck at home, and how risk plays a factor in the sociality of these individuals.

CHAPTER THREE

QUEER SUBCULTURES DISRUPTED: RISK, TOUCH, AND ISOLATION

As explored in the previous two chapters, MCC is a community that has been defined by its kinforming relations for LGBTQ+ individuals within the larger Knoxville area, as many of these kinship bonds can be traced back to the necessitated networks of care during and following the AIDS crisis in America. Because of COVID's inherent risks through gathering, touch, and sharing, it has disrupted queer subcultures, arguably more than other subcultures. Queerness is often defined by a sense of touch via the relationality that exists and is created between queer bodies when intimacy is introduced, whether touch is sexual (Dean 2009), friendly, familial (Shirinian 2018), or even unfamiliar (Crimp 1989, 2004; Sahlin 2013). In the previous chapter I explored the question of whether the MCC community is experiencing COVID as a continuation of AIDS which leads to the question of whether or not shared exclusion informs the importance of touch to contemporary queerness. Understanding COVID as a continuation of AIDS for this community leads to a larger focus on the biosocial implications of kinship, relationality, intimacy, sociality, and community. COVID has created a disruption to the notion of queer kin established in chapter one. In this final chapter, I seek to explore how these queer families are being maintained during isolation in nuclear homes. How are touch and intimacy being disrupted and what are the effects of this on queerness? How is risk involved in these senses of both family and intimacy? How is this community specifically dealing with COVID and what are the related effects on queer communion and relationality? Finally, how are digital technologies both helping and hindering the intimacy and kinship experienced within MCC?

Maintaining Kinship

As a space that fosters a unique form of kinship, one that is defined by public communion and shared experiences, the closing of MCC in March of 2020 sparked a lot of fear and anxiety among its members as it had become such an important space of communion. Throughout the summer of 2020, congregation members would constantly ask if and when we would be able to return in person. They always seemed disappointed and unsatisfied with the indefinite closure of not only the physical building, but many of the activities they had grown accustomed to, such as the monthly potlucks described in chapter one, the monthly game nights, the wildflower hikes, the group movie nights, and the multiple small group discussions. It seemed that while everyone was getting adjusted to Zoom and the church existing through a virtual platform, the place of the church, or lack thereof, became more important than the space of the church. In an attempt to make better use of the physical space of the church during pandemic times, the church discussed the potential use of the sanctuary as a progressive school as a way to breathe life into an empty building.

It is the Summer of 2020 and church services have been occurring on Zoom for several months now. The service ends on Zoom and Colleen shuts off the recording feature signaling that everyone is free to talk socially. People exchange his and hellos before Colleen asks everyone to quiet down. She announces that MCC has been approached by a group of parents looking for a church sponsorship for a small, progressive school to be established as an alternative to public school during quarantine and social distancing times. This Sunday afternoon that would normally be reserved for social time is now allocated as an open discussion on how the congregation feels about the school. One congregation member immediately voices concern, almost aggressively. She seems highly skeptical of the school's intentions and doesn't

understand “why it has to be us whose names are associated with this”. She warns of the potential negative consequences as she gets overly emotional, her voice on the point of breaking as she holds back tears. She goes on hinting at a similar personal experience of hers, one where “intensions were good” but the outcome was not, however she remains vague and unwilling to elaborate on this experience. She continues to bring up fears related to insurance and finances with very specific concerns about the church’s current insurance policy. She almost seems to be hinting at the notion of this school being some kind of scam or fraud to steal money from MCC, but she doesn’t come out and say this directly. No one else seems to share these feelings and concerns, in fact, the rest of those in attendance seem enthused by the idea of the empty place being used by others for productive means. Many people chime in that this could be a great PR opportunity for the church and could provide more exposure to the larger Knoxville community. It would allow the church to be seen as “more than just a gay church”. This conversation goes on for over an hour, with all in favor except for one. Colleen concludes the discussion saying she will get more information and make sure we are protected financially and insured properly before any decisions are made. The meeting ends and the school is not mentioned again for several weeks. When it is mentioned, it is in passing, and a decision has been made to allow it to happen.

The decision to allow the school to function within the walls of the church is one that, although opened to the public for debate, was eventually made behind closed doors. While the school began using MCC in August of 2020, it is unclear whether it will continue to use the physical space of the church if and when in-person church services and functions resume. Based on previous observations on the way that MCC congregation members react to children (see chapter one), it seems that allowing a school to use the church serves multiple purposes. It

primarily is a means of service for the church, as traditionally other children's groups such as Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops often hold meetings inside churches. By allowing a school to use the church, the church itself feels it can more seriously legitimize itself in the eyes of the Knoxville "community", as pointed out above it becomes "more than just a gay church." But allowing children access to the building throughout the week for schooling serves a potentially larger, although more implicit purpose. Many patrons of MCC do not have children of their own but delight in the presence of children, as this reifies the church as a space of both normalcy and family as mentioned in chapter one. Although not mentioned in the conversation above, it is clear by the congregation's actions when children are present. From the constant smiles at children to the aptitude to hold crying babies and toddlers by many, to the potluck conversations that always turn to "Did you see that baby, weren't they just so cute?", and even Colleen once stopping a sermon to say "I love having children in the church" when two kids were playing not so quietly in the back of the sanctuary and their parents were notably embarrassed by the noise, MCC adores and delights in the presence of children at the church. By allowing the school to repurpose the church during this time of forced abandonment by the congregation, they may in fact be vicariously living through the families that are utilizing the church, as the church's physical building now functions as a "familial" space, with children being the product of nuclear families and the ultimate physical manifestation of both kinship and intimacy. In this sense, the public-private place of the church is inhabited by the heteronormative embodiment of the nuclear family, where private space is transformed into a collective experience (Eng 2010). The use of the space by nuclear families triggers a sense of normalcy and legitimacy through a homonormative lens, as the child represents both a future and a conservative agenda (Duggan 2002; Edelman 2004). In this way, members of MCC know that, although they may be trapped at

home either alone or with a partner, the church is continuing to serve an important role for a different local community than their own.

Family manifests at MCC in a variety of ways, some in more homonormative ways than others. As noted in chapter one, many patrons of MCC met their partners at MCC-related events. This is true for Colleen and her wife, who met at an MCC and several years later got married at an MCC conference in the hotel lobby in which the conference was being held in Toronto. This shows how much MCC influences the families of many of its patrons, and how for those who are married or who have partners, maintaining intimacy at home during COVID is a simple task, when both their nuclear families match their chosen, MCC families. As Colleen noted during our interview when discussing the challenges of COVID to the church congregation, “relationships are critical”, especially for those who are older and/or live alone. Relationships in this sense referred to not only intimate, or homonormative relationships, but familial and friendly ones as well where intimacy is not sexual in nature. The kinship bonds described in chapter one reveal that the necessary relationships for the members of MCC are based more in a sense of complex queer family than in a sense of nuclear, or homonormative family. She went on to say that “some people have needed the church more”, specifically these older and isolated church members, which has magnified the negative effects of COVID for many of them. Not being able to connect with one’s chosen family (or “faith family” as Colleen likes to say, referring to queer kinship within the church specifically), especially during such a challenging time as the new reality COVID has created, is a very difficult reality for many to deal with. During this interview, Colleen went on to share that some the church has played varying roles of importance for members during this difficult time, highlighting the important part not only religion, but arguably more importantly, relationships play in many church members’ lives. During our interview,

church intern Camille and I also discussed the challenges of COVID to the church family and the ways in which it was preventing this kinship that I had witnessed and about which she also spoke at length. She noted that “we have to find ways” in order to overcome these challenges and for the church community to maintain its multitude of relationships. During our interview when we talked about AIDS and its relation to COVID, Colleen also mentioned forming family out of extended relationships (beyond the nuclear household and beyond birth families) out of necessity during AIDS. While I had originally wondered if it is possible that COVID may demand the same family formations, based on my interviews and observations I have found that the MCC community has gotten creative in maintaining this sense of family digitally, which I will discuss further in this chapter. Rather than relying on nuclear families, as many of them live alone or with a partner who they already consider part of their queer kin, MCC members have formed and/or maintained close, intimate relations between households.

Risking to Touch: Intimacy Reimagined

Perhaps the most challenging facet of COVID on the MCC community has been its restriction on closeness, touch, and intimacy. As I observed when I first began attending MCC in October of 2019, the sheer quantity of touch among church members was notable. I not only witnessed romantic touch (like partners holding hands or kissing), but familial and friendly touches, mostly through hugs. MCC’s aptitude for touch was noted by both Colleen and Camille during interviews with Camille remarking “there’s nothing like physical fellowship, especially in our denomination, we’re a huggy group, maybe because we were excluded for so long.” For Camille, “physical touch is part of the atmosphere in MCC⁵, telling you you’re welcome here

⁵ Camille is interning for MCC Knoxville virtually. Her home church is MCC L.A., and the observations she shared with me during our interview, specifically about touch, seemed to be true for both locations.

and many of us need that, people get you here.” This sentiment is not only something that Camille felt when she first attended an MCC many years ago, as she shared with me during our interview, but something I noticed as well during my first visit to MCC. The importance of touch comes from a site of exclusion as facilitated by AIDS, where touch between queer groups and non-queer groups was wrongfully linked to disease, dirtiness, and transmission. This led many of the members of MCC to rely on their queer family for instances of touch, and why touch became a kin-forming act, both via and despite possibilities of transmission (Dean 2009). The importance of touch and intimacy has dramatically been uprooted by COVID, as the virus is highly transmissible, and therefore touch is prohibited. Touching each other is a risk, and it is a risk to touch. Church members must often weigh the importance of touch and how much they are willing to risk in order to touch or be touched. For those church members who cohabitate with their partners, touch is less of a risk as they are interacting every day. However, for those who live alone and who have lost one of their most important forms of intimacy, they may be willing to risk more in order to touch. This includes going out to bars or clubs, as one small group discussion member did which I will discuss further below, or defying city mandated curfews and safer-at-home orders, as some local businesses and their patrons have been doing. While talking about this issue during our interview, Colleen noted that many church members are “hungry for hugs, especially those single and older or isolated members.” Those who live alone are “hungry for physical touch [because] church is the one time a week you know you’ll be touched” she pointed out, highlighting why intimacy is such an important part of the community and how touch helps the kinship within MCC manifest. The exclusion from larger senses of community mentioned in chapter two in relation to touch separates these notions of kinship from those of other small churches. Everyone I have interviewed has said that they “miss the hugs” in one way

or another, as emphasis continues to be placed on the lack of physical affection that members are able to share online and how much of an impact that physical affection and intimacy has on their relationships with others and the importance of MCC in their lives.

The biosocial implications of COVID, primarily halting many forms of touch, have not only disrupted the public intimacy that is so important to MCC, but the private intimacy as well. As we discussed COVID's negative impacts on not only MCC, but queer people more generally, Camille chuckled "can't have casual sex right now!" While at first it seemed like a joke, the implications of COVID on both dating and queer sex have been detrimental not only to young people, but many of the single patrons of MCC as well. Based on what I became aware of within formal interviews as well as in larger group discussions with MCC members, promiscuity is seen as an important aspect of queer life. Not being able to go out to bars and meet people or meet up with strangers from dating apps has been a serious challenge for many queer individuals, regardless of age, as they have been forced to make difficult choices as to whether and how much they are willing to limit their intimacy with others. The members of MCC seem to not only be open about non-monogamous sex, but see it as an important aspect of their subculture as lesbians and gays. However, a great deal of emphasis is placed on safe and consensual sex. During both formal and informal interviews, participants have shared with me the frustrations placed on their sex life by COVID as they have ultimately been unable to meet new people because the risk has been too great, with one church and small group member Sean commenting that "it's hard to meet people now" when discussing the limitations of COVID and a queer business owner highlighting how their business functions as an unofficial cruising ground when things are "normal". After a two-hour long interview about the challenges of COVID they

exclaimed, “Maybe I just need to get laid!” as an outlet for their frustration and anxiety and followed up with the comment that it’s difficult to do that during a pandemic.

COVID has not only disrupted MCC as a location of queer subculture, but other local sites as well, especially when it comes to queer sociality and meeting people for sexual intimacy. Local gay bars and clubs have faced hardships as well, as they represent some of the few sites of queer subculture within the city. Many of these locations openly label themselves as places of gender affirmation and love. A local business owner of one of these sites felt that for the LGBTQ+ people of Knoxville and the surrounding area, these locations are “saving lives”, and therefore have to stay open and even break the city-wide imposed curfew, as they mentioned to me during a formal interview. COVID has been detrimental to all types of businesses, but especially bars and restaurants as they are considered to be sites of higher rates of transmission. Following several rounds of mandatory closing, bars and restaurants have had to make hard decisions about whether to stay open and how late into the night, as well as whether or not to reduce staff. Those few businesses that cater to a particularly queer consumer base have had to weigh these decisions even more heavily, as they serve a niche population and provide some of the few sites of queer sociality within the city.

Within these locations, not only have city and state mandates caused disruptions through altered business hours and limited capacity restrictions, but internal conflicts, specifically in the form of positive COVID tests from patrons and workers, have interrupted the possibilities of queer public life through cancellations of events like drag shows, bingo, and trivia nights, as well as sudden business closures, regardless of where or how patrons and employees may have contracted the virus. One of Knoxville’s oldest and most well-known queer establishments paused live drag shows beginning in July of 2020 and canceled an anniversary party for the

business the following month. Drag shows did not pick back up until two weeks later following the required quarantine period. While patrons may feel anxiety surrounding COVID, whether related to being present within public spaces and exposing themselves or for fear of their favorite local businesses being shut down due to lack of profit caused by COVID, queer business owners have especially dealt with fears and anxieties not only for their business and other queer locales, but for the stability and wellness of the larger queer populations they serve. During our interview, one queer business owner revealed to me that while he did have some anxieties, they were partially alleviated by the number of years he had been a business owner, whereas a close friend of his who was a new queer business owner in town was anxious as they were struggling with opening a queer-affirming business during a global pandemic.

These queer-affirming local businesses provide some of the only spots in the city for queer socialization outside of MCC. Unlike MCC, these businesses are open daily and provide sites of queer communion that are not based on religious affiliation. These businesses play an important role in the development and continuation of queer subculture of Knoxville, but COVID has presented many challenges for them as well. Lisa Duggan challenges this notion of queer consumption through her rhetorical device of “homonormativity” (2002), however I along with others (Gray 2009) argue that within cities like Knoxville, that have few public spaces dedicated to queerness, queer-communion at these businesses is based less on consumerism and more on a sense of belonging and communion, where public spaces fluctuate between both public-public and public-private. During my MCC affiliated small group discussion in October of 2020, it was revealed to me that just a month or so earlier, one of the groups regular members had died of COVID. I could tell by the looks on the participants’ faces that this was a death they were still grieving. Together, they informed me that he was older and had lived alone and the

months of isolation had eventually brought him to a breaking point. He made a conscious choice to go out and socialize with friends at one of these local businesses and in doing so caught COVID which ultimately killed him due to his age. He took the risk to socialize and it cost him his life as well as the grief of his friends who relayed this story to me. When I asked the other members of the group what risks they had been taking, one member, Martin, said that he was “taking little chances but not big ones” and “trying to ‘moderately’ enjoy life.” These chances he referred to were getting together with one close friend occasionally, but that attending bars or clubs like the member who had died was completely out of the question for him. Due to COVID’s inherent sense of risk, queer intimacy has been reimagined to account for its potentially life-threatening risks of touch and intimacy for the members of MCC. Historically, queer subcultures were defined by risk-taking actions through unprotected sex, cruising, barebacking, and general promiscuity (Bersani and Phillips 2008; Dean 2009; Muñoz 2009; Bersani 2010, 2018). However, due to the age of many of the members of MCC, they have largely given up the risk-taking behaviors of their youth in favor for “normalcy” as assimilation and a reversion back to homonormativity (Phelan 1997). This assimilation has led them to fear many risk-taking activities (in the case of COVID social gatherings and dating) due to the life-threatening consequences that are informed by many of their underlying health conditions. Now, even those “safe” risky behaviors such as promiscuity facilitated by dating apps or gay bars, are no longer safe enough.

Technology: Life through Zoom

Perhaps COVID’s larger effect on queer intimacy, kinship, and relationality has been the necessary transition to and reliance on digital technologies in order to maintain relationships. Prior to March of 2020, few average Americans were familiar with the communications software

Zoom (I had used it once in 2018 for a long-distance interview). However, Zoom would quickly become part of everyday life for many (privileged) people who found themselves suddenly working from or doing school from home. In the context of MCC, Zoom quickly became the go to for church services and other social events. The first mention of COVID at MCC came during the sermon on March 1, 2020 and the last in person service would take place on March 15, 2020, with sermons immediately being moved to Zoom following that Sunday.

There were a multitude of concerns surrounding virtual church as soon as it began. One of the biggest concerns that has continued throughout the pandemic has been a fiscal concern. If people are not attending services in person, will they still feel compelled to donate/tithe? Luckily for MCC, the congregation has remained loyal in their giving patterns, and MCC has yet to have any monetary issues related to the pandemic. However, as the pandemic continues with virtual church remaining for an indefinite amount of time, multiple interviewees have mentioned that fiscal anxieties will not fade. Another concern has been member interaction and retention, both during and in a post-pandemic scenario. The initial transition to a completely virtual church was a challenge for all, but more so for those members who either did not have reliable computers and/or Wi-Fi and those members who were fairly tech illiterate. While many of the older members of the congregation were well versed in using computers for everyday tasks such as writing emails and creating word documents or even using social media like Facebook, for those who did not use computers often the challenge of becoming acquainted with a completely new type of software such as Zoom was not one that was easily overcome. However, the increase in digital presence did create some positive outcomes, such as an increase in engagement from disabled or already home-bound patrons and an increase in engagement from out of town or out of state parishioners. The transition to a completely virtual format has made MCC a more

accessible space for some who were already (prior to COVID) unable to attend in person services.

However, some church members have shared concerns about the virtual format. During a formal interview with Benjamin, a congregation regular and former board member, he expressed increased frustration less so with COVID and more with MCC's decision to remain online while other aspects of life (such as retail and food and beverage related businesses) had begun to open up. He told me that he felt there was a lack of unification among the congregation online and that virtual church has made the spiritual experience more of an intellectual activity than a religious one, as it feels like "watching a TV show." He shared with me that one of his main concerns was that people would not find the virtual services as meaningful as in person ones and eventually fall away. He presented this concern as a different form of risk, as he told me there was both "a risk in attending but a risk in NOT attending!" emphasizing his concerns for the church's longevity, finances, and overall attendance numbers if services were to continue to remain online indefinitely. He found COVID restrictions to be both depressing and aggravating, and not being able to attend church in person was "another on a laundry list" of restrictions. Unlike others I had spoken with, he did not see the church reopening as a health risk for the patrons who would actively choose to attend again in person. He posed to me, "If I can go to work, the gym, the grocery store, and restaurants – all of the *dangerous* things – then why can't I go to church?" While others I spoke with were also sick of quarantining and stay at home orders, Benjamin was the only one in favor of reopening the church to resume in person services and activities. It seems that all the important facets of his life that involved him going places had resumed, and he therefore felt it was time for the church to do the same.

Despite feeling like a struggle at times, digital technologies have been an important aspect to MCC, even pre-COVID. When Collen began her tenure at MCC in the late summer of 2020, she was already livestreaming church services on Facebook so that the church community she had left in Texas could tune into her sermons in Tennessee. During a formal interview with another church member, Sean, who had become the unofficial tech person for troubleshooting during virtual sermons, he mentioned that the church was lucky to have Colleen as a pastor as she was already livestreaming these services prior to COVID and said, “we were blessed to have one of the few pastors who knew how that [livestreaming] worked.” However, both he and Benjamin mentioned in their interviews that the church’s tech infrastructure, both audio and visual, would need to be upgraded if and when in-person services resumed so that livestreaming could continue to be a component of MCC.

Much of the concerns around church on Zoom that have been shared with me have been less about how people are dealing with increased use of technology now, and more so about what the long-term effects and consequences will be, especially when things return to “normal”. Leaders like both Colleen and Camille are already working on how to integrate online and in-person services in the future in order to not lose any current online patrons. Colleen revealed to me during our interview she was worried about losing members to COVID, not in death but in different forms, such as the possibility of people not wanting to return after having been away from the physical building for so long. As Sean put it during our interview, even though we are now more connected to strangers (those who can attend virtually but are unable to attend in person due to disability, location, etc.) how can we maintain those connections when services resume in person?

As Camille pointed out during our interview, smaller churches like MCC have had to be more creative in order to survive, they “focus on the people and not the building” which seems to define MCC as a space rather than a physical place, as it has endured online. She and others like Sean pointed out that regardless of the lack of intimacy and touch, they still feel a connection to the congregation just being able to see others virtually. Sean shared with me that he didn’t mind being stuck at home so much, as he enjoys the alone time, but he knew that others were “chomping at the bit to be back.” Benjamin seemed to be one of those, as he and I also discussed the physical exhaustion of having to sit in a chair all day and stare at the screen and the toll it can take on you both mentally and physically. He noted that speaking at a screen (as he often participates in worship as a liturgist reading passages or leading prayers) that is black or has no faces can be disorienting and alienating. One of the members from the larger discussion group I participated in in October of 2020 mentioned that virtual or quarantine life had him struggling with feelings of depression, memory problems, trouble keeping schedules, and his days running together as he shared that he felt his “life has no structure.” During that same conversation, another group member shared that they were “grateful for Zoom, otherwise it [COVID/quarantine] would be total crap.” However, they also shared feelings of necessitated virtual communication undoing progress of many LGBTQ activities, but because of this “we’ll appreciate things more after this is over.” The youngest member of the group, Jonah, added that he was glad “people are making it work with social media, but I worry how much longer that can go on... it will be very damaging.”

COVID has disrupted queer intimacy and kinship for MCC by transforming both the space and place of the church. What once was a site of intimacy that transcended the boundaries of nuclear homes and monogamous relationships has been closed so that intimacy now occurs

only within those homes and those relationships that echo heteronormativity through their reliance on coupledness. This disruption has shown the resilience and creativity of that community to meet challenges that had previously never even been conceived, despite the necessary (albeit temporary) transformation of notions of intimacy. Due to this population's resilience founded through AIDS, they have mostly been able to refocus their energy and care for one another into making life work for the time being, whether that be through virtual church services or conversations with close friends on social media. Although intimacy has been disrupted, reimagined, and recreated, it has not been lost as the church congregation still maintains its sense of family, even without the monthly potlucks or the weekly hugs. While this crisis was unprecedented, MCC has found itself within a unique situation of being prepared to handle a transition to virtual communion thanks to Colleen's prior preparations and the church congregation's extensive networks of care, as noted in the previous chapter, that have been converted to phone calls and weekly check-ins. Much like AIDS, COVID presents a biosocial component of risk via touching, sharing, and being together through the transmission of fluids which may carry disease and through the sense of stigma attached to a disease discussed in the previous chapter. Biosociality, defined as shared suffering (Petryna 2003), shared genetic identities (Rabinow 1996), or intimacy through virus transmission and contraction (Dean 2009), appears in the context of MCC differently. Rather, this biosociality is both a site of risk-taking for some, but also a site of risk management for others, with many choosing not to partake in risky actions for fear of the potential consequence. In this sense, intimacy and biosociality within the context of MCC during COVID are linked as biosociality has limited most forms of non-heteronormative intimacies.

Of all the challenges MCC has faced, this one is the one that continues to be the hardest to deal with as the weeks continue to go on and patrons continue to long for hugs and handshakes from their faith family. The positivity and resilience that MCC has embraced is reflected in this sentiment Sean shared with me during our interview, that “the church will function whatever we do...it will work.” As mentioned in the previous chapter, this persistence born out of necessity during the AIDS crisis has made the MCC population particularly prepared to handle a crisis such as COVID, as they have not allowed their kinship ties to be ruptured by isolation.

CONCLUSION

When I first began attending church services at MCC Knoxville in October 2019, I could not have prepared myself for what that experience would look like virtually, and neither could the rest of the congregation. However, despite the ongoing global pandemic that still runs rampant even while I'm writing this conclusion, the members of MCC have shown incredible strength and resilience in the face of multiple and complex forms of adversity.

As discussed in chapter one, queer kinship is largely intertwined to the current formation of MCC, with members viewing other parishioners often more as family than friends. This is defined by their reliance on one another and the ways in which they see themselves not only as a community, but as a family that is formed through sharing, in substance and in trauma. Many of the members at MCC discussed feelings of guilt or resentment toward their birth families that were tied to their sexual or gender identity. MCC represents a place they can let go of all of that and share those feelings with others who have similar experiences. MCC is a site of both queer communion and family as queer people have defined family for themselves and made family for themselves when they had none.

This sense of family was largely developed through the shared trauma of the AIDS epidemic, as discussed in chapter two. This shared trauma (ironically) prepared the members of MCC to live through yet another pandemic at a time when they were most vulnerable. The church's role during the AIDS epidemic, as a place of sanctuary and communion for many gay people who had nowhere else to go and no other sense of family, helped to establish the grounds on which the queer family discussed in chapter one would be built. The resilience shown by the community of MCC in the late eighties and early nineties would again become helpful beginning in the spring of 2020 and onward, as they were prepared to deal with a unique circumstance of

hardships. What they were not prepared to deal with however, was the transition to an online world where the physical kinship and intimacy established within the walls of MCC would be challenged.

As discussed in chapter three, the transition to an online life has been challenging for some, however the resilience of surviving AIDS has been carried through to allow for creative and flexible adaptations to new iterations of intimacy. This has been shown mainly through the maintenance of relationships via digital technologies such as Zoom, phone calls, and text messages. While intimacy within the confines of the church building has been halted, a social intimacy has been maintained and physical intimacy has evolved to reflect more heteronormative notions of nuclear households.

The community of MCC has been experiencing COVID in a multitude of ways. Due to the demographics of the congregation (age, underlying/pre-existing health conditions, and sexuality), COVID-19 can be understood as a continuation of the AIDS epidemic through its unique effects on the community as a vulnerable population during both pandemics. The shared and collective memories and trauma of AIDS make COVID more impactful due to the emphasis placed on risk, isolation, and socialization. The relationships that the community of MCC has built and maintained, through AIDS and beyond, has led them to understand themselves more as a family (both a queer and a faith family) than a church congregation or group of close friends. The limitation on physical intimacy that COVID has caused has not disrupted these feelings or these perceptions of relationships, but simply required the MCC community to reimagine and redefine them through digital means for the time being. While maintaining these ties in a digital world has proved difficult and less fulfilling, the congregation of MCC has found ways to express these notions and bonds, even though physical touch and shared substance have been

halted. While some have risked their lives in order to be close to others, many have chosen to manage these aspects of risk through the use of digital technologies and socially distanced and limited interactions. The effects have been damaging to some, causing feelings of depression and anxiety, but many remain optimistic and look forward to time together again. While COVID-19 has presented many unique challenges for an aging, queer population, the resilience and kinship ties based in networks of care that were established during AIDS due to their exclusion and isolation from heteronormative circles has allowed the MCC community to show great optimism and creativity in overcoming these challenges in order to maintain their chosen/queer/faith family, which for many of them may be their only family. The sense of family at MCC is tangible, both in person and online, and a disruption such as COVID-19 is not substantial enough to break the bonds established during the genocide of AIDS that they survived and still continue to grieve.

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